NEKOMONOGATARI
CAT TALE (BLACK)

NISIOISIN

TRANSLATED BY
KO RANSOM

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Art by VOFAN

Translated by Ko Ransom

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CHAPTER NIXED TSUBASA FAMILY

NEKOMONOGATARI (KURO)

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CHAPTER NIXED

TSUBASA FAMILY

TSUBASA HANEKAWA

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001

It's taken me long enough, but I'd like to think back to Golden Week, those days when I frolicked with Tsubasa Hanekawa to my heart's content. They are harsh memories, they are astringent memories, but in a way they are bittersweet memories, too, and yet, if I could somehow forget them, I would–I would fly in the face of reality and make it all nothing more than fiction. Let me think back to those nine gleaming days.

Tsubasa Hanekawa. Seventeen years old. Female. High school senior. Class president. Model student. Braided hair with even bangs. Glasses. Serious, too serious. Virtuous. Very smart. Kind and fair to all. But it's not like I think I can express a girl as exceptional as her to you by listing off these sorts of signifiers and character traits, not for a moment. Yes, there's a certain something, about something about her, that can't be expressed in any human language and that you can't understand unless you've actually faced her, unless you've actually been in her presence. The reality of it is if you want to speak of who Tsubasa Hanekawa is, you would most likely need to do it in the language of the gods.

Or maybe the language of the devil.

So to be frank, and though I really couldn't be any more sorry about it, I've given up from the start; I could go into every last minutia, from end to end, missing nothing, and I'm certain that I still wouldn't be able to convey the truth of those nine nightmarish days, or the all-but-imperceptible imitation of the truth that those nine nightmarish days were. Having abandoned all hope of communication, I am the embodiment and avatar of resignation.

And anyway, it's not as if I want at all to communicate to anyone the way I feel.

Only.

I simply–and plainly–want to mumble on and on to myself about my savior, Tsubasa Hanekawa, my friend, Tsubasa Hanekawa.

There's probably no meaning to it.

There's certainly–nothing at all to it.

No meaning, nothing at all for anyone, not even me.

It's what you might call an empty shell of nothing.

That's exactly why Hitagi Senjogahara or Suruga Kanbaru, whom I'd later meet–who charge headlong toward their goals, prepared to sacrifice whatever it takes, with such strength that at times they don't hesitate to trample underfoot that which they hold dear–would see the nostalgic, revanchist act I'm about to attempt as utterly frivolous longing, worthy of a snicker, not even worthy of scorn, unproductive and backward-looking.

Those girls, both strong and weak, share a set of values that say people must live their lives facing forward, if not actively then positively, if not aggressively then ultimately.

They say it doesn't have to be pretty.

Scrappy is fine, greedy is fine.

Those are their values–and they're different.

I'm different.

Feeble and flimsy Koyomi Araragi, unable to hold a candle to them, is different.

A weak-willed coward who doesn't just look left and right but back, too, before stepping in a pedestrian crossing, a mockery of a human–is different from those girls.

And.

Tsubasa Hanekawa and I are the same.

Lumped together.

Contrary to expectations, you might say.

Complementary to emotions, you might say.

However rude it may be to lump myself in with someone as exceptional and outstanding as her who is in a way beyond our ken, if there's any concept that grows asymptotically close to becoming a moral learned over my Golden Week, that would have to be it. Using the word "moral" almost makes me sound like a fraud, but what else can I do, when it's the unshakable truth.

I've resigned myself–there's nothing else I can do.

The point in common between me and her.

The common denominator between Koyomi Araragi and Tsubasa Hanekawa.

What's the same inside our hearts.

I understand it now–now that time has passed since Golden Week and second semester is just about to start, it hurts horribly but I understand it after all this time.

It is literally painfully obvious.

Why Tsubasa Hanekawa decided to call out to me.

Why Tsubasa Hanekawa allowed herself to encounter me.

Why Tsubasa Hanekawa saved me.

But this is something I've come to "understand now," "after all this time." In other words, it's too late, it won't come to anything. The only things I can take away from it are things that can never be taken back, undertakings that have already taken place.

Something just might have happened if only I'd noticed these kinds of circumstances, maybe not from the moment I met her but at least by Golden Week.

The two of us, feeble and flimsy.

We just might have been able to become something.

So that's why these really are words mumbled to myself in an empty classroom after school, a detailed, standardized apology written from this dull seat.

Words of regret carved into a desk as graduation draws near.

I feel remorse about what happened, but I don't feel regret–no, I'd never try to whitewash my situation with a line like that.

I feel remorse, and I feel regret.

I wish I could make it so that it never happened, and if I could do it over again, I would.

I'm just frustrated, so frustrated about that Golden Week. Why couldn't I make it go any better? Why, why, why? I'm so frustrated that I'd want to die if I wasn't immortal, so frustrated that it makes me want to cry, and even now I have dreams about it.

They are, without question, nightmares.

Tsubasa Hanekawa.

The girl with a pair of mismatched wings.

To go into the timing of this story, it took place around a month after I went through hell for two weeks, during the spring break between my second and third years of high school–though still plagued by lingering aftereffects, I had somehow resumed my everyday life after suffering, like a fool, the highly romantic experience of being attacked by a vampire, of all things, in present-

day Japan. Mistaking me for some anachronistic juvenile delinquent, Tsubasa Hanekawa schemed her way into making me class vice president, and while I don't remember whether I was still worried by that development or if I'd gotten over it by then–that was when it happened.

She was bewitched by a cat.

A cat.

A mammal belonging to Carnivora Felidae.

That's why ever since Golden Week–I haven't liked cats.

I'm scared of cats.

Yes–just as I'm scared of Tsubasa Hanekawa.

This preface has gotten a bit long, but there's no need at all to fret–there's more time after school than you might think.

Now then, I'd like to tell you about a dream I had last night.

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The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

The next day, I was roused from bed as usual by my little sisters Karen and Tsukihi. Whether it's a weekday, the weekend, or a holiday, they're like machines designed to wake me up early each morning, which is why it made no difference that it was the first day of Golden Week, April twenty-ninth. While I almost wanted to praise their diligence–rising and shining when they always goofed off and stayed up late couldn't be easy–they probably weren't interrupting my sleep out of concerned consideration for their brother's daily rhythm but rather as a way of displaying power. It was a demonstration, a shot in a domestic territorial dispute.

Speaking of which, I haven't spent much time yet describing what exactly my sisters do when they wake me up, but, well, it's mostly because it isn't anything worth describing.

In the anime version, my sisters will go on to approach me with a plethora of rousing methods–shoving me down the stairs, putting me in the camel clutch, hitting me with a muscle buster, and more–but those are, you could say, played up for the small screen. I'm sorry for shattering any perceptions, but sadly, no little sisters in the real world are so cute.

Well, anyway, I don't know about other households, but at least in my family, Karen and Tsukihi just gently say, *How long are you gonna sleep for? C'mon, wake up,* and then–

"You fell back asleep? You're dead."

A crowbar came swinging down beside my pillow.

"Whoooooah!"

I nearly leapt as I dodged it.

Actually, I didn't dodge it all the way. It took a tuft of my hair with it.

The tip of the crowbar then pierced my pillow, hair and all.

A poof of feathers scattered into the air.

The sight would make you wonder if angels had descended from heaven, which is why I thought I may have died, but the 32nd notes I could feel my heart trilling from inside my chest hinted that I was still among the living.

I looked around.

There with the furious expression of a demon-god, clad in a yukata, was Tsukihi Araragi, my little sister in her second year of middle school, as she struggled to remove the crowbar that had penetrated not only my pillow but the bed underneath it.

The crowbar-like object.

No, just a plain old crowbar.

The most crowbar-like crowbar in the world.

"Tsu-Tsukihi?! What are you doing? Are you trying to kill me or something?!"

"You went back to sleep, why would I want you alive? Why would you sleep after Karen and I went to the trouble of waking you up? It doesn't make sense. You can die you can die you can die."

"You realize we're only at the opening scene and you're already acting like a completely different character?!"

Think about consistency with the previous installment!

“I just wasn’t standing out compared to all the other characters, so I thought I’d try and act like a stalker,” she explained.

“You’re acting like a psycho, not a stalker!”

“But if you were able to dodge that, I guess that means you were only pretending to be sleeping.”

“No, I was sound asleep…”

It seems people are surprisingly capable of responding to danger even when they’re asleep.

They might say humans have reached an evolutionary dead-end, but no, there’s still a lot further we can go.

“You were worried about not standing out as a character? God, you sound like a middle schooler,” I scolded.

“That’s because I am a middle schooler.”

“Right.”

It’s not like my time in middle school qualifies me to make fun of anyone else’s, of course. Well, maybe my experience means I have a duty to warn others.

“Anyway, don’t overdo it,” I told her. “You’re the little sister who comes to wake me up in the morning. That’s enough.”

“That’s like, the definition of a background character.”

No thanks, she said.

Fair. No one would want to be a character defined by her older brother.

“I want to be a flashy character like Karen. Look at her, she’s the final evolution of a little sister.”

“I wouldn’t call her a final evolution. She’s more of the kind of character where your life is over if you end up like her. Listen, there’s

still hope for you. You need to work hard to become a proper, respectable character."

"A proper little-sister character."

"Yup."

No one present realized that striving to become a "little-sister character" was hardly proper.

"Specifically," I said, "you should try to become like Marilla from *Anne of Green Gables.*"

"Marilla?!"

"Well now, that's right," I replied in my best Matthew impression.

I'd just woken up, okay?

"Man, Marilla really is the ideal little sister," I opined. "I wish I could've had one like her 'cause she's a *tsundere* among tsunderes. 'I wanted a boy! A girl is of no use to us!' and then fawning over Anne by the end."

"Oh, so she's a tsundere in the classic sense."

"She's one by current definitions, too. Her snippy comments to Anne after she's done fawning are super-adorable, too."

"Is that how my big brother reads *Anne of Green Gables*?"

"Yep. As I read it, my mental voice actress for Marilla from start to finish is Rie Kugimiya."

"No actual names."

And how old is Marilla anyway, Tsukihi asked.

What an idiot. She didn't understand anything.

The real fun with little sisters starts after they turn fifty.

“When you think about it, Matthew got such a good deal,” I said. “Living all that time together with his little sister, plus he gets to raise a little non-blood-related girl with braids. He’s who every gloomy shut-in boy wishes he could be, even more so than Shinji.”

“Please don’t call Matthew from *Anne of Green Gables* a gloomy shut-in…”

“The scene where he goes to buy a Christmas present for Anne is such a tearjerker. It really strikes a chord. Yes…you end up buying inessential stuff,” I keenly recalled that masterpiece. “And that’s how you need to be, Tsukihi. Because then, one day, you and I can live together in our old age at Green Gables.”

“You know you’re almost proposing to me.”

“Hah, it’s no mere proposal. It’s a polonaise.”

“A courtship dance?!”

How am I supposed to read Anne of Green Gables *now?* groaned Tsukihi, clutching her head.

What am I ever going to do with you, I muttered, shrugging and getting off of my bed to begin taking off my clothes.

This of course isn’t to suggest that I was about to commit any sort of indecent act against my little sister, only that I was changing from my pajamas into my house clothes.

“Umm, so what’s up with Karen?” I asked.

“Excuse me?”

By the time I’d spoken, Tsukihi, her mission to keep me from going back to sleep apparently accomplished to her satisfaction, was already splayed out and lazing around on my bed.

She wasn’t just a far cry from Marilla, she had even given up on getting her crowbar out of my bed.

What was I supposed to do that night?

Maybe leaving my room and coming back would fix it, like a video game?

Either way, Tsukihi looked like a caterpillar the way she rolled back and forth without any concern for her yukata opening up.

That's what I'd call her. Sisterpillar.

"You shouldn't give your little sister kinky nicknames, Koyomi."

"Stop reading the narration. And anyway, answer my question. I asked what happened to that flashy, tracksuit-wearing, taller-than-me female whose hip you always seem to be joined to. You're not with that ponytail on legs?"

"Karen's jogging right now."

"Jogging? Jogging as in running but not quite? That's rare, she doesn't normally do that."

"Today's special. She said it's her way of celebrating the beginning of Golden Week."

"How is that a celebration?"

"She must be thinking of Olympic torch runners."

"Oh. So she's as stupid today as any other day."

"I think she's gotten Golden Week and the Olympics mixed up."

"Oh. Because of the gold medals they give out during the Olympics? She's as impressively stupid as ever."

How heartwarming.

So that's why Tsukihi had come alone the second time she came to wake me up.

They'd come together early in the morning (well, an hour ago) to rouse me from my idle slumber, but after realizing that I'd attempted

to fake them out and go back to sleep, Tsukihi had come marching back in on her own for my reawakening (whatever that means).

Hence the crowbar.

You really couldn't let her act on her own.

Between Karen and Tsukihi, the former, with her life's calling to martial arts, is the more brutal of the two, but the latter seems to be the more dangerous. She doesn't know the meaning of the word "restraint."

"Ugh," I grunted. "And I guess Golden Week starts today? Nothing but bad news."

"I see you're being pessimistic from the very start, Koyomi."

April twenty-ninth, a Saturday.

Greenery Day.

"It hasn't even been nine hours since Golden Week started, you know," reminded Tsukihi.

"Nine hours is enough to figure most of the details out once you get to be a master like me."

"Yeah, you do hate holidays, special events, Sundays, and all that. You're a weekday lover, a weekday person."

"A weekday person?"

What a sorry-sounding person.

Completely charmless.

Then again, I *am* a sorry person.

"It's not like I hate them," I countered. "I just dislike dealing with them."

"That's the same thing."

“Is it?”

Hate and dislike feel like two separate things to me.

But if you want to argue that they’re the same, well, they are.

It almost felt like I’d said, *I’m remorseful, but I don’t regret it,* only to be told that remorse and regret are synonyms, but I wasn’t able to figure out how to go about rebutting her.

“It’s not like there’s anything particularly better about it being Golden Week, though,” I said. “Morning is still going to come, my little sisters are still going to wake me up, my nails are still going to get longer, and my height is still going to stay the exact same.”

“Yeah, I guess so. We don’t have school is all.”

“Man will never stop warring with man, betrayal and lies will continue on without end.”

“What? Why are you suddenly talking about things on such a grand scale?”

“There’s still no question that someone in this world is going to die today. How do you disregard that and call today a day to be celebrated? We ought to be mourning!”

“Koyomi, why are you angry, and who are you angry at?”

My little sister seemed genuinely creeped out that her older brother, not knowing how to deal with all the time he had on days off (having nothing to do), was pissed off about it.

I could understand how she felt.

But I was getting fired up, so I continued. I’m not the kind of brother who gives any sort of consideration to his little sister’s feelings.

“I’m in mourning every hour of every day. I’ve never once sent holiday cards to anyone.”

“Isn’t that because you don’t have any friends to send them to?”

“Don’t act like you know everything about me! You don’t know a thing!”

“I at least know how many holiday cards you get.”

“You’re right.”

“More precisely, I know how many holiday cards you don’t get.”

“You’re right.”

My holiday card count finally dwindled down to zero after I started high school. I didn’t even get cards from kids who sent one to every classmate. In other words, I didn’t feel like I was in mourning year-round, I was just plain mournful.

“I see, I don’t like holidays because I don’t have any friends to play with,” I admitted. “What a fresh, new discovery.”

“Sounds like you learned something you were better off not knowing.”

Tsukihi looked at me, her honest-to-goodness brother, with a deep sense of pity in her sad eyes. As a side note, she (and Karen) have a network of friends so large it requires them to send holiday cards in the hundreds, putting pressure on both the Araragi family budget and the Araragi family mailbox.

We were extreme siblings, if nothing else.

I could only imagine how hard it’d be to find the average between the three of us.

“But that doesn’t change the fact that there’s nothing different or better about holidays,” I argued. “Dream all you want, it’s not going to change reality. You could put aside my personal circumstances, and there’d still be nothing better about them.

Golden Week? Give me a break, they're just days like any other. What's so golden about them? Are they gonna catch me in the rye? Er–I guess that'd be Holden Week. Morning is still going to come, my little sisters are still going to wake me up, my nails are still going to get longer, my height is still going to stay the exact same, man will never stop warring with man, betrayal and lies will continue on without end, and your panties are still going to be white."

"Don't bring up my panties."

Taken at face value, Tsukihi's reply sounded like the bashful plea of a fair, young lady, but I want you to know that she was a second-year middle schooler smack dab in the middle of adolescence who couldn't care less that the hem of her yukata was exposing everything for the world to see.

It wasn't just a peek under the kimono, it was practically the full monty.

My sisters, Karen too, really did everything they could to grind down any illusions I had about women.

"I bet Gregor Samsa had a great time. I mean, he woke up and he was a bug! Now that's what I call a metamorphosis. I couldn't be any more jealous as a fellow little sister-haver. Don't you agree, Sisterpillar?"

"Don't be trying to make that kinky nickname stick to your little sister."

"Hmm."

Well.

Having said that, maybe envy for Mr. Samsa was misplaced given my own metamorphosis into a vampire, let alone a bug.

Yup.

A month had already passed since spring break.

A lot of things sure did happen in that time–would be the kind of thing I'd say if this was a series finale, but it really did feel surprising in a way when I took a glance back.

My experience over spring break had made an indelible impression on me. It was so incredibly intense, in other words, that it left me feeling like those two weeks were the climax of my life.

If you believe that every life has its peak, that spring break was mine.

And that's why it was surprising.

Life still went on even after spring break.

On and on, eternally.

One thing after another, it continued.

People say that life isn't a game, and I guess they say that because it doesn't have a reset button. The way I see it, though, isn't the real reason that it doesn't have an ending?

I suppose games that don't have endings do exist these days, whether they're online games or StreetPass or whatever, but it's almost like that's a case of games coming to resemble life, not the other way around.

Whatever the case, human life doesn't end so long as you don't die–life goes on.

There's no ending theme or closing credits.

You can become a high schooler.

You can wash out.

You can have no friends.

You can become a vampire.

You can turn back into a human.

Life goes on.

Slow and steady wins the race.

Or, slow and steady is life's pace.

"They say Golden Week this, Golden Week that, but you know what I really think?" I asked my sister. "Shouldn't you be embarrassed for falling hook, line, and sinker for a movie industry sales tactic? That's my appeal to you."

"An appeal, you say."

"A repeal!"

"You want to cancel a string of holidays?"

"It needs to come to a stop. There isn't a single good thing about it. And speaking of things coming to a stop, it makes printers and distributors grind to a halt, too, so it pushes everyone's schedule up!"

"Why are you talking like you're in the publishing industry?"

"A book that should've come out in April ends up coming out in July thanks to Golden Week!"

"What a specific example."

And it's not just the publishing industry. There are some people in jobs out there that don't let them take a single day of Golden Week off, which is apparently why a certain Japanese public broadcaster doesn't use the triumphant and dazzling "Golden Week," opting instead for the simpler "long holiday."

Then again.

That doesn't change the fact those people still have to work.

“And speaking of sales tactics, it’s the same with Christmas and Valentine’s Day,” I went on. “And then you have White Day, which doesn’t even make any sense! Does it have its own Jesus Christ or Saint Valentine-esque origin?”

“It doesn’t seem like it.”

“So then it’s not White Day, it’s a white lie!”

Tsukihi tilted her head in confusion. “Huh?”

I thought I’d be able to pull that one off through sheer momentum, but it didn’t seem to work. “Either way–and I know I’m repeating myself–it’s such an overstatement to use the word ‘golden.’ A golden string of holidays? Its length changes depending on the timing of the weekends around it, so why compare it to one of the most stable materials in the world?”

“Hmm. I don’t know about getting so specific with your criticism, but I guess calling it ‘golden’ might be overdoing it.”

“I wonder what’s on your mind right now…”

“Why are you suddenly talking like the King of Distortion from *Boogiepop*?”

Don’t say something just because you think it might sound cool, my sister chided.

I was deeply remorseful.

“Golden?” I reprised. “Is a bunch of holidays in a row really that great? Sure, three-day weekends used to be rare in the past, but now we’ve started observing holidays on Mondays.” Incidentally, people in the publishing industry also view them as anything but holy. It’s a business that even wishes Saturdays and Sundays would disappear. “Even if you ignore my dislike of holidays, it still doesn’t feel like it lives up to its name.”

“Hmm. I don’t know if it’s about living up to the name as much as a branding strategy. Like something they use to make it feel more fun. They talk about a labeling effect, and people do seek out nice names. Did you know why Greenland is called Greenland? It’s an Arctic tundra, but they wanted to make it sound like it’s green all over so that lots of people would go there.”

“Who do you think your brother is? Of course I know that. And that’s not all, its capital was named Godthåb, God’s hope.”

“Yeah, I know. But it’s called Nuuk now.”

Brother and sister smiled as this tense trivia showdown disguised as friendly banter played out. But then the battle came to a close with a single line from Tsukihi.

“By the way, Greenland is a Danish territory.”

That left me in the dust.

Really?

Danish territory?

I had to admit, at the end of the day, she was a smart girl.

Trivia was one thing, but there was no way I could ever match regular knowledge for knowledge with her.

“Hmm, and it looks like we’ve ended up talking about Greenland on Greenery Day,” I tried to conclude.

“Koyomi. I don’t know where you got that idea, but today’s April twenty-ninth, Showa Day. Greenery Day is May fourth.”

“Huh? The fourth isn’t a generic holiday?”

“Nope.”

“The times sure are changing. I don’t have the slightest idea anymore what year it is on the Gregorian calendar. Are they still doing analog TV broadcasts these days? But you might be right. Golden Week doesn’t fail to live up to its name, it succeeds because of it. It’s like Japan as far as country names go. We call ourselves ‘the land of the rising sun’ when we’re nothing more than an island nation to the far east. Who isn’t busy building their brand? But regardless of whether Golden Week’s name makes it a success or a failure, we’re still putting lipstick on a pig. I think we should be like that nameless public broadcaster and just call it a long holiday. Of course, I’d change my tune if you decided to wear dazzlingly gold panties for these nine days.”

“I’d never wear panties that tasteless.”

“White?”

“White,” Tsukihi declared, spreading the hem of her yukata wide to make what was already showing even more brazenly visible.

It was the act of a deviant.

Of course, while I was the intended audience, seeing it didn’t do a thing for me. Not when she already walked around the house in her underwear after getting out of the bath.

It was no different to me than if I was flipping through a book of color samples.

But it felt wrong to be so disinterested as an older brother in this day and age, so I decided to clap my hands as loud as I could before praising her to high heaven.

“Woo-hoo! Nothing better than little sister panties!!”

“Aww, thank you!”

She played along, too.

What kind of siblings were we?

Doubt had started to weigh down on me quite heavily at this point, but Tsukihi stormed ahead.

“White panties really are the only way to go. In fact, I’d even say that if they aren’t white, they aren’t panties at all.”

“Oh man, I can hear the excitement in your voice. All right, here we go! I can feel a full two-page spread of you talking about panties coming on.”

“That’s right. If you don’t like reading about that kind of thing, you should skip ahead,” Tsukihi footnoted, though it felt awfully late to be saying that given how meritless our conversation had been to this point. “And it’s not just panties, Koyomi. I think that all underwear, from bras to whatever else, generally ought to be white.”

“Wow. So you’re really going for two pages?”

I’d just have to play along.

I was ready for her to do her worst.

We were so busy talking that I wasn’t focused on changing my clothes. I was half-dressed now but my torso was still bare, and yet I clasped my hands and began to stretch, moving my arms up and down and swinging my shoulders from side to side. Then I plopped down cross-legged.

Okay. It was time to get real with her.

“You know though, Tsukihi. I’m sorry to criticize you right as you’re getting all riled up, but I just can’t agree with you there.”

“Hrm? Oh, so are we on opposite sides here?”

“If you want to put it that way, then yes. The opposite sides of a shiny coin!”

Since I was talking to my little sister, I didn't have any reservations about using lines that weren't particularly cool or funny at all. I hope that you take the fact that I'd just been woken up into consideration and overlook this last exchange.

"Are you just going to be two-faced?" my sister probed.

"Don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to say that I'm against white panties. In fact, I accept them with wide-open arms. No one is as tolerant as Koyomi Araragi when it comes to panties. But don't you think that where there's color, there ought to be variation? Why have colors if you aren't going to be colorful with them? White or not, how Spartan would our world be if everyone in the world wore the same color of underwear?"

"I'm not sure how I'm supposed to reply to that one."

"Colors may be what saves this world, who knows–well, *I* know!"

"I'm not sure how I'm supposed to reply to that one, either."

It's not like I'm trying to reject all other colors, Tsukihi said.

It seemed like she had a well-considered position. Then again, it made sense for her to be picky about her underwear. Her tastes may be skewed toward Japanese clothing, but she was in general a well-dressed girl, a fashion leader among her middle-school classmates.

"I just think that among the myriad of colors, white stands at the very top," she began. "If you said there's a color hierarchy, white would totally rule over all the rest. It's to the point that I feel like replacing the very word 'ranking' with 'whitening.' Can't you imagine it already? 'This week's top-ten whitening!'"

"Hmm… Well, yes, only black is as full and complete, but I see how you might not want to prioritize a color that also equals a darkness that obliterates all others."

I could imagine someone thinking that we were two art school students engaged in a serious discussion, but we were talking about underwear.

Got that? Panties.

“At any rate, Tsukihi. It’s about time people came clean on how they really feel about a common view that’s out there.”

“What might that be?”

“There’s nothing particularly sexy about black underwear.”

“You said it!”

High five.

My little sister and I came to an understanding through our taste in underwear.

“Yeah!”

“Whooo!”

This was a culturally refined conversation we were engaged in.

I could see someone registering it as part of our cultural heritage.

“We were talking about whether or not things live up to their name, and in that sense,” I commented, “there’s a whole spectrum of feelings people have about different colors.”

“Spectrum. Colors. I get it.”

“Yikes, that wasn’t intentional.” I realized that Tsukihi had said “a myriad of colors” earlier to tiptoe around that trap. What a sneaky little girl. “I mean like cold colors and warm colors. Or how painting dumbbells white makes them look lighter.”

“No, you’ve got it all wrong. White looks serious, pure, and chaste,” Tsukihi put our conversation right back on track. It was

pretty sharp of her, but at the same time I also felt that perhaps our original topic wasn't worth returning to. "Just look, Koyomi," she said, undoing her sash and taking off her yukata, exposing not just her pants but even her brassiere. She folded her yukata by her side and turned my way, showing me that not only her panties and brassiere but also her high socks were white. Was it what you'd call a fully coordinated outfit?

Tsukihi Araragi then began kneeling and posing.

"So? It looks serious, pure, and chaste, doesn't it?"

"No, I'd say ridiculous, soiled, and slutty…"

If she wasn't careful about assuming such poses, she might end up as a figurine looking just like that.

They might make a Petite Nendo out of the moment.

The pillow behind her with a crowbar sticking out of it was a nice addition, making the scene look like a racy centerfold.

"Koyomi, isn't that just due to your preconceptions and prejudices about me? Hey, how about if I hid my face with my hand and became anonymous!"

Tsukihi held the fingers on her right hand together to hide the top half of her face.

Now there was a censor bar over her eyes.

She continued to pose that way.

"……"

I told her it only upped the raciness.

Maybe she was stupid after all.

How odd, when she supposedly had excellent grades, close to straight A's.

Maybe they were right, and how well you did in class was only one aspect of intelligence. But if this idiot really aced it, I bet that sapped her classmates' will to bother studying…

"Well, what about those striped trunks you're wearing, Koyomi? The way you're showing them off to me, those horizontal stripes make me think you need to be behind bars instead."

"For what?"

Then I realized, for all my worrying about my little sister's mental condition, that I was also in nothing but my underwear.

I know I said I was half-dressed, but I didn't say I had put on pants!

And there you have it, a perfect example of a narration trick.

A living specimen of the mystery genre: Koyomi Araragi.

"Koyomi, people are going to get the wrong idea if you're also going to show them your underwear and it isn't white."

"They're getting the wrong idea from the moment I'm showing them my underwear, white, striped, or anything else."

A sad misunderstanding, or maybe a correct understanding.

"How often do I get to show my underwear, anyway?" I asked.

"Huh? You're wrong. I actually have lots of opportunities to see boys' underwear."

"What?!"

My heart instantly filled with murder.

If my little sister, a second-year middle schooler, had that many opportunities, her high school senior brother had no choice but to act.

“No, no, I don’t mean it in any obscene way. What are you even imagining?” whispered Tsukihi, stroking my face like a jockey soothing her horse. “I guess it’s not the same as low-rise pants, but you know how boys like to wear them saggy? When they crouch and stuff, their shirts get pulled up and their underwear shows.”

“Ohh.”

“Or during P.E. class when their underwear hangs out from their gym shorts.”

“So that’s all you meant,” I said, relieved.

Thank goodness, I wasn’t going to have to kill anyone.

I was nearly about to slaughter all of Tsukihi’s male friends.

She remarked, “Lots of people have always complained about how girls’ skirts are too short, but as a girl, I wish people would pay more attention to how loose the rules are for proper attire for boys. I mean, I think boys’ gym shorts are way sexier than girls’ volleyball shorts. All of that leg hair, out in the open? I can’t even look straight at it.”

“There the problem seems to be whatever’s going through the head of whoever’s doing the seeing.”

Then again, boys and girls get both embarrassed and aroused over different body parts.

In that sense, and there aren’t that many places where you can have a serious conversation about this, boys might have more openings in their defenses than girls. If you were to ask me whether or not I could do a lap around the town wearing nothing but my striped trunks, I wouldn’t be able to give you a straightforward no.

“And if we’re going to be serious about this,” I continued, “no matter how aroused a girl gets, it’s hard for me to imagine them

forcing a boy to do this or that with them. Maybe girls get shy as a kind of necessary survival instinct, to protect themselves."

"We don't need to be serious about this. Let's keep talking about underwear."

"……"

I got a vague feeling that I'd come to know someone like Tsukihi in the near future. A boys' love-obsessed basketball player. It felt like a dry run–was it just my imagination?

I hoped it was just my imagination.

"Survival instinct, huh? In that respect, girls like Karen who're way stronger than the average boy do seem to let their guard down about this stuff."

"Ah, true."

"She'll even change into her gym clothes in front of boys."

"Tell me what class she's in, right now. I'm going over and massacring all of the boys in it."

"Come on, it's fine. When she starts changing, it's the boys who turn away and run off," Tsukihi soothed me once again.

Stroke. Stroke.

Was that cold sweat I saw on her?

"Really? So I don't have to massacre them?"

"You'd only cause more trouble if you did… I know this isn't something I should be saying about my own sister, but Karen isn't very feminine."

"I guess you're right about that."

She was a martial artist, after all.

Even taking away the fact that she was my little sister, she didn't feel very feminine to me, and for her part, she hardly seemed bound by traditional notions of ladylike behavior. In fact, from what I'd seen of her exploits as one of the Fire Sisters, I was worried she was trying to become a man among men.

"In that sense, I guess it's inevitable that she can just relax," I noted. "That tracksuited girl who's trying to become a man's man ever wearing a short skirt or low-rise pants is just unimaginable."

"Oh, but Karen does have a cute side. She says she's embarrassed about her underwear being visible under her tracksuit when she meets her boyfriend, which is why she goes commando instead."

"What is she, a nympho?!"

Every girl in my family was a pervert!

What a mad nympho tangle.

"No matter how much I like kimonos, even I wouldn't go without underwear on a daily basis. All I can do is take my hat off to her."

"She's already taken her underwear off, there's no need for any more clothing to be removed here. But putting aside the fact that her go-to panties for dates are literally lacking, she's normally pretty colorful with her choices. A real colorful girl, right? So do you two clash when it comes to that?"

"We do clash. In fact, Karen almost hates white. But the underlying thinking is the same. She says she doesn't like white because it's too serious."

"Ahh."

So she didn't like being serious.

Well, she was at the age when you feel like rebelling.

She might pretend to be some defender of justice but was acting like a normal middle schooler.

Even so.

“Sheesh, you two really are still kids. Look at how you’re letting yourselves be bound by trite values. What an impoverished way to see the world. It wouldn’t be an overstatement for me to say here that ‘white equals serious’ is just as prejudiced and narrow-minded as ‘black equals sexy.’”

“Excuse me? Are you trying to say that white doesn’t equal serious? I’ll kill you.”

“Why are you being so short-tempered with your big brother? No, what I’m trying to say is that whether or not it’s serious has less to do with the color of the underwear than your person–”

I stopped before I could finish my thought.

An idea came to me.

No–maybe I should say a realization.

About a question that had perplexed me incessantly for the last month–something I’d agonized over but made zero progress on.

We were on such a closely related topic that it seemed like it would be a waste not to ask Tsukihi–that’s what I realized.

“Um, what were you going to say? Your person…?”

“Oh, just that whether your underwear looks serious or not is a manifestation of your personality. In other words, if you’re serious, pure, and chaste, it doesn’t matter if you’re wearing black or white, your underwear is going to look serious, pure, and chaste.”

“Hm. Like me right now!”

“Nope.”

I was pretty sure I had in fact asserted the opposite.

Off by 180–my little sister was a wonderful person who didn't bother listening to a word I had to say.

But that was precisely why she was the perfect person to ask for advice–no matter what we discussed, she'd probably forget it by the next day.

"Okay, Tsukihi. That's enough talk about panties."

"What? We're already done?"

"We're long past that two-page spread."

If anything, we'd spent too much time on the topic. I'm sure more than a few people out there skipped ahead trusting Tsukihi's footnote only to be dumbfounded that we were still talking about panties.

But what's the big deal, right?

Everyone likes talking about panties.

"Anyway," I said, "a young woman shouldn't be repeating the word 'panties' like you have."

"Huh? Are you really trying to act like we haven't been in this together?"

Tsukihi frowned as if she'd been betrayed.

Then again, it was a momentous betrayal–a textbook example of pulling the rug out from under someone's feet. My treachery was nothing more than a segue, though, and I hoped she'd overlook it.

"Instead of talking about panties," I declared, "let's talk about love."

"Love?" Tsukihi scowled. She clearly didn't want to. "Nooo! I wanna keep talking about panties."

She fell backwards on my bed and flailed her limbs so furiously I couldn't tell if she was throwing a tantrum or trying to swim. She needed to take her practice routine to some gym floor instead.

…I'd feel bad if people misunderstood my maidenly sister, so allow me to add a footnote of my own: Tsukihi saw all of this talk about panties as a discussion on underwear as fashion, nothing more. I just thought I should stress that here in closing.

"Shut up. We're going to talk about love, okay? Now stop acting up and put on some clothes."

"Same to you, Koyomi."

"You're right."

It went without saying.

While everything was in full accordance with our house rules, this tableau of a half-naked brother together in a cramped room with his underwear-flaunting sister was not one that would be looked upon kindly by society.

The curtains were wide open, too.

Tsukihi and I both stood to attend to our attire–she put her yukata back on, while I resumed changing into my house clothes. Though we would no longer be able to speak naked truths to each other, this is where I really had to spill my guts.

It was time for verbal seppuku.

I sat back down in the same position.

Tsukihi got off my bed and sat across from me cross-legged, possibly noticing the change in mood.

…This is a complete digression, but it feels to me like there aren't many girls who sit with their legs fully crossed. Maybe it has to do with their skeletal structure?

Tsukihi was doing a great job in that regard, but it could have been because she was flexible. Never working out the way Karen does, she looks so squishy that you might wonder if half her flesh was melting.

“You’re as soft as a macaroon, you know that?”

“Did you mean to say marshmallow?”

How do you manage to bring up the less known of the two and get it wrong, Tsukihi asked.

A flawless retort.

Of course, it’s not as if having a squishy body necessarily means you’ll be flexible.

The real difference between men and women in this instance was probably one of manners.

“So, what about love, Koyomi?”

“Well, it’s not exactly about love. It’s more something that might be love.”

“Hmm? Something that might be love? What is my big brother even talking about? I wish he’d drop dead.”

“Stop wishing for me to die every chance you get. You’re the only person I can ask. You’re in middle school but already have a boyfriend, which means you must constantly be fielding questions from your friends about romance. You’re a veteran.”

“You can’t ask Karen? She’s in middle school but already has a boyfriend, and she’s constantly fielding questions from her friends about romance. She’s a veteran.”

“I would never ask that idiot for advice on any topic,” I stated. A decisive tone by my standards. “That tracksuited woman is a veteran

of war, not love. Even if I did ask her for help, she'd just offload my question onto you, right?"

"No, I don't think so. If you see her as some sort of combatant who spends all her time running from one brawl to the next, you're very mistaken. She'll help if someone comes to her looking for romantic advice. She just fails every time, that's all."

"That's the worst of both worlds."

If you can't do something, you should tell people you can't do it.

The fact that she won't is why she's still a kid.

"Then what about you?" I asked. "What's your success rate when it comes to romantic advice?"

"A hundred percent, of course."

This seemed to be a point of pride for her, given the boastful way she puffed out her chest. While I was pretty annoyed at the sight of my little sister bragging to me, I couldn't deny that it was a boastworthy résumé.

A hundred percent?

She had to be exaggerating, though.

"No, I'm not exaggerating. It's an honest number. It doesn't matter who it is–if someone comes to me for advice, I'm going to make their romantic dreams come true."

"……"

That was scary to hear.

Those results were actually menacing to the point that they made me hesitate about asking her–well, it felt like I was already making a big mistake asking my little sister for advice in the first place.

And not just any advice–romantic advice.

Then again.

I still didn't know if *this* was love in the first place–I could be casual, like I was dripping solution onto litmus paper.

"There's actually this girl in my class I have an interest in."

"What percent?"

"Not an ownership interest!"

Our exchange operated on a high level, and yet was as stupid as could be, in a way that was only possible between siblings. But Tsukihi wasn't really trying to make a joke and seemed to be half-serious. She was visibly confused.

"What? What? I don't understand."

Smirking with a faint sense of superiority over having bewildered my little sister, I explained in more direct terms, "In other words, I might be feeling affection for a girl who's in my class starting this year."

It was an odd thing to be saying with a smirk.

"My goodness!" exclaimed Tsukihi.

If her popularity was the result of this kind of overacting, it felt like it might be worth taking notes, but I had other concerns at the moment.

And wait, why would she be shocked?

"Why wouldn't I be shocked? I'm not just shocked, I'm fried to a crisp! My own big brother, who used to make cringey declarations like 'making friends would lower my intensity as a human,' finding someone he likes?"

Shaking all over, Tsukihi covered her mouth.

I'd scared my sister for real.

"It's almost as shocking as a dog starting to talk to me," she said.

"……"

You know, maybe a dog standing on its hind legs, but talking was in the realm of biological impossibility. How much of a loner did she take her own brother to be?

Not that she was particularly wrong, of course.

And by the way, it did kind of sting that she offhandedly called that declaration of mine "cringey."

"Wow, wow, we need to break out the champagne," she fretted. "How does it go again? Do I face it toward you?"

"What are they teaching you in home ec these days?"

It would make for a lively scene, though.

"And don't jump to any conclusions. I just have an interest in her, and I specifically said 'might' and 'something that might be.' Nothing's definite yet."

"Hrmmm?"

"Which is why I'm asking for your advice, as much as I don't want to. How do I determine if I like someone of the opposite sex?"

"…Um. Sorry, Koyomi." Tsukihi's body abruptly stopped shaking as she apologized to me. I didn't know what the apology was about, but it did feel nice to have my little sister telling me she was sorry. "What was that? Could you repeat it?"

"Oh, you didn't catch what I said? C'mon, aren't you supposed to be the brains of the Fire Sisters? What a blunder. Give me a break. Okay, are you ready? You'd better be listening this time. How do I

determine if I like someone of the opposite sex? In other words, at what point do the feelings I have for the person in question go from normal to affection?”

Tsukihi crossed her arms in silence.

What was the matter? I couldn’t chew it down any more than that–did I have to go get some liquid baby food?

“Sorry, Koyomi,” she apologized again.

The reason didn’t matter, the number of times didn’t matter. It felt nice to have my little sister tell me she was sorry. It was so refreshing that the breakdown in communication we were having barely bothered me–but that didn’t seem to be the case for Tsukihi, the apologizer (well, if either of my sisters started saying, ‘It feels nice to tell my big brother that I’m sorry,’ I’d take them straight to the hospital), who disclosed the reason for her apology.

“A near-infinite number of people have come to me for romantic advice, but I’m sad to say that I’ve never been asked a question on that sort of level.”

Huh?

Really?

So it did hurt to ask.

I was going to need to file for damages.

“So after all your bragging, Tsukihi, that’s all you’ve got to show for it?” I stood up so I could look down on her, body language and all (imagine an American soap opera). Looking down on my little sister felt nearly as good as having her tell me she was sorry.

It made me feel like I could forgive her for betraying my expectations.

“I guess it’s fine,” I said. “I suppose I might be the one to blame here, asking a middle schooler a fairly difficult, high-level question.”

“No, I mean I’ve never been asked such a simple, low-level question before.”

Tsukihi Araragi gazed at me with the eyes of a dead fish–no, gazed at me with eyes like I was a dead fish. It was a look that made the living want to die, more a death ray than a look.

“Yeah. Koyomi, I know you’re normally the one who handles the retorts, but allow me to take on that role this one time. ‘Ooh, I don’t know what this feeling is. Could it be love?’” She stood up as if to give chase and, backfisting my chest like an old-school slapstick comedian, hollered, “What kind of fair little maiden are you?!”

Getting insulted by my little sister, being called names by my little sister, and taking a backfist from my little sister all felt pretty decent too, but I’m getting this odd sense that my proclivities are turning overly and excessively perverted, so going forward, let me leave out descriptions of the heart-throbbing excitement that was mine.

I gotta be careful, Koyomi Araragi is supposed to be a character who’s just playing the role of a pervert in order to entertain all of you.

“A maiden? Who’s the maiden here, middle-school girl?”

“There are no maidens among middle-school girls!”

She’d spoken with such conviction. Perhaps that was what she truly believed as someone who’d clambered over a corpse mound of queries about love, and I felt like a retort could dig too deep and result in me never trusting women again. I decided to let it pass.

“Sit! On your knees!” my sister yelled.

At me.

It made me want to defy her and ask what right she had to act so high and mighty, but the intensity behind the words forced my body to obey. How slavishly submissive was I?

But what was with her?

What was she so mad about?

What had enraged the woman? What had infuriated her?

I was kneeling before her, but Tsukihi made no move to sit. Her arms crossed and her chin high, she glared down at me.

“Koyomi. I need to ask this first. Are you being serious?”

“As serious as can be. I’ve never not been serious in my life.”

“Watch your mouth,” she ordered me.

My little sister.

“You need to address me as ma’am. And don’t act stupid.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am.”

I obeyed.

My little sister had forced me to sit on my knees before her, was glaring down at me, ordering me around, and making me call her ma’am. This made me feel a certain way, et cetera.

Leave it out, Koyomi. Leave it out.

“Explain yourself from the very beginning. And you call yourself my big brother?”

Why yes, I did.

And I’d never been happier to call myself that.

This was getting so good I was starting to wish they’d make her the thirteenth little sister in *Sister Princess.*

“Um, well, I can’t really be too specific about it, but…”

Going into details would have been a violation of (my) privacy, after all. I didn't want my personal info falling into my little sister's hands.

"…But a bunch of stuff happened. Let's just call her Miss H."

"Miss H."

How particular of you, Tsukihi said.

It was just an initial, though.

Particular, yes, but reasonable.

"Ever since we were put in the same class at the beginning of the month, it seems like she's been all I can think about. And it's not just mental. Sometimes in class, I look away from the blackboard and find myself looking at her seat. And it's not just during school. On my way there and coming back, I just so happen to search her out. Even when I go shopping at a bookstore or something, I start thinking about how it'd be neat if we ran into each other, this being a small town and all. And when I'm reading a book that I bought at the store, I think, 'Oh, I bet Miss H. would like this sentence.' If I try to buy something dirty, a thought goes through my head like, 'Ah, I bet Miss H. would hate me if I did,' and I put it back on the shelf."

"Could you please not be so open? I don't want your personal info falling into my hands."

I don't want to hear about my big brother agonizing over buying dirty magazines, Tsukihi muttered.

Damn, saying "Miss H." had led me astray. The initial also stands for "hentai" after all.

"Actually, Koyomi?"

"What."

"That's love."

She'd made her assertion. Her affirmation.

That she did so with an appalled look and not a serious one only made her more convincing, but such a clear-cut opinion made me want to challenge her.

I'm a bit of a devil's advocate at heart.

"You don't know that for sure. It's possible to feel that way about someone you hate. And considering how vague these feelings are, I might just get used to them if I wait long enough."

"Hmm. Yes, but no… How do I put this?" Her arms still folded, Tsukihi tilted her head in contemplation. "There are a lot of things I want to say, but I don't know how I should say them."

"What's that supposed to mean? Is this kind of thing so obvious to you that you don't even need to think about it?"

So she was like a centipede that had been asked how to walk? There's a story about the creature being asked the sequence in which it moves its namesake, its hundred legs, and not being able to answer. Worse, while it was able to walk normally before, it can't figure out how it managed to the moment it's asked that question, leaving it immobile.

This was getting risky. Thanks to my careless question, Tsukihi might have to pass up on romances for the rest of her life. She could end up sharing the same problem I'd come to her with.

……

But that didn't seem like such a bad outcome.

"No, Koyomi, like I told you, it's not some kind of high-level question. It's a low-level one, okay? Also, centipedes don't have a hundred legs."

"Wh-What?! Centipedes…don't have a hundred legs?!"

I tried overreacting to a clearly ridiculous degree to this dime-a-dozen piece of trivia that I already knew, but Tsukihi fixed her blizzard-cold stare at me, and I sat back on my knees, dejected.

She was some kind of Frieza.

“By the way,” I said, “if Goku and Frieza fused, would they have turned into the ultimate warrior known as Geezer?”

“Goku and Frieza wouldn’t be able to fuse, they have completely different body types.” I’d charged straight at her with another question, undeterred, but not only was Tsukihi’s reaction calmer than expected, she was even closely familiar with *Dragon Ball.* “Forget that centipede stuff. It’s simpler, like I’m trying to teach a kindergartener the concept of multiplication.”

“Multiplication? Don’t be ridiculous. Are you saying this is that simple?”

“Yes. What you should be thinking when you look at me now is that this is how puzzled a little sister would be faced with a brother who can’t do multiplication.”

“……”

What a picture.

You couldn’t put a little sister in any worse of a situation.

Poor thing.

“Oh, but I could understand that happening,” I said. “You know, like, uh… Who was that guy who invented the light bulb and stuff again? Thomas the Tank Engine?”

“Thomas Edison.”

“Yeah, him.”

“How does the name ‘Thomas’ come to you before ‘Edison’?”

“Sorry. We’re pretty good friends so I end up calling him by his first name without thinking.”

“Yet you mistook him for a tank engine.”

“So, about Thomas,” I pushed forward. I’m stubborn when it comes to jokes. “They say that when he was in elementary school, he constantly asked his teachers basic questions like ‘Why does one plus one make two?’ Not even multiplication, this is addition. He wasn’t able to understand things in the way they were taught to him, so he kept asking questions until he was satisfied.”

“Stop, you’re almost making it sound like you and Edison have something in common. You don’t.” Tsukihi shook her head. Vigorously. “There must be lots of precocious kids all around the world throughout history who’ve asked smartass questions like ‘Why does one plus one make two?’ But there’s only one Thomas Edison, king of inventors.”

“Whaa?”

What an unsentimental and pessimistic thing to say.

What a buzzkill.

Don’t be discouraging all those smartass kids out there who might one day become Thomas Edison.

I objected, “But even Edison must have played around as a kid and told people, ‘I’m going to become the king of inventors!’”

“If he was saying that back in his day, that means he must have invented the time machine, too.” *I guess it’s true that the simpler the idea, the harder it is to explain,* Tsukihi put us back on track. “You must be serious about this in your own way, though. I shouldn’t insult you or poke fun at you too much, but if you want my personal opinion, I think that if you’re wondering whether or not you like someone, you basically like them already.”

“Really?”

“Would you spend all this time in deep thought about it if you didn’t?”

“I don’t think I’d call it deep thought, to be honest.”

It was more of a nagging feeling.

More of a gnawing feeling.

Like mist or fog, something that just won’t clear up–that’s all it was.

Like a fluffy cloud.

As someone who’d never bothered confronting his own emotions, it was all but impossible for me to understand how I felt.

But.

I was wrong to have been that way–I realized that now.

I could realize that now.

Which is why now–I wanted to confront them properly.

I wanted to confront my feelings, my emotions, all of that, properly.

“Well,” I said, “I’ve never found myself liking another person before to begin with.”

“You haven’t?”

“Yep, you could say never.” Though I was still sitting on my knees, I puffed my chest out with pride the way Tsukihi had earlier. “I’ve never loved anyone before.”

……

……

That’s odd, I thought.

I'd started to feel empty as soon as I spoke the words.

Like someone had popped a big hole in my puffed-up chest. No, maybe that was a hole leading straight to hell that had always been there.

Hmm?

Was I always this kind of character?

This wasn't good, was it?

My bragging posture began to droop until I was hunched over. Of course, you're not really supposed to bend your back in either direction when you're sitting formally.

"You know, on a school trip," I said, "when you're done with the pillow fights and it's past lights out and everyone is whispering about their romantic secrets–if you could imagine someone piping up and saying, 'Actually, I don't have anyone I like right now,' then that person would be me."

"I have a feeling that has something to do with why you don't have any friends."

No one asked you.

This wasn't a conversation about friendship, it was about romantic feelings.

Not being able to make friends because you're not able to love? What kind of new generation were we?

"I do have an excuse, though–"

"I don't want to listen to any excuses."

"Listen!"

"No!"

"This is an order from your brother!"

“Gah… I guess I don’t have a choice, then,” my sister relented.

It seemed like she was going to listen to my excuse.

“That overnight trip scenario is a good example of what I’m trying to say. Don’t you think there’s an odd sort of pressure at school to have someone you like?”

“Guh,” Tsukihi reacted ever-so-slightly. It seemed she hadn’t expected my point to be so sensible.

“I call it romantic coercion. What I never liked is the feeling of–how would you put it–of being forced to have a best buddy, and maybe the girls who come to you for romantic advice as friends feel the same way. It’s a form of violence, and I never liked it.”

“I do feel like you’re overdoing it with the devil’s advocate stuff, but you might be right to say that a kind of romantic supremacy rules over us at school. I think it’s the natural result of cramming a bunch of men and women together in the same spot. But,” Tsukihi said, initially agreeing with me, or rather, acting like she agreed with me. “Even if that’s the reason why everyone is so interested in romance at school, it’s not a valid reason why you, personally, can’t love others. It might have been suffocating for you, but it’s not why you can’t love others, is it?”

“It isn’t.”

“It’s an excuse, isn’t it?”

“It is.”

“Apologize.”

“I’m sorry,” I apologized.

She had demanded an apology.

From me! Someone who’d never once apologized to anyone since the day he was born!

“Don’t lie,” she said.

“Ah, okay. I’m sorry. I apologize for always causing you so much trouble, Miss Tsukihi.”

“I’m putting us back on track.”

“Please, go ahead.”

We got back on track.

Around the point in the conversation where we discussed how Koyomi Araragi had never liked another.

I have to say, though. It seemed like I had to be put back on track a lot when I talked to Tsukihi.

“And now that I think about it, Koyomi, you’ve never brought a girl to the house before, have you? Then again, you’ve never brought a boy here either, but still.”

“I guess. But that’s what I’m trying to say–I don’t understand what it means to come to like someone. It’s like a language from a different planet.”

“Okay, but don’t you get somewhat of an idea of it when you read manga or watch anime and dramas?”

“Of course I get an idea, but that’s all fantasy. It’s like you’re telling me to believe that dragons exist. When you watch some stylish love story played out by celebrities, do you think, ‘Oh, that looks pretty good. I’ll do that’?”

“Hmm. True.”

But hearing it from someone who sees himself as another Edison… I don’t know, grumbled Tsukihi. My dragon example seemed

to lack persuasiveness on its own, so I decided to bombard her with more.

"When you read *Harry Potter,* do you come away from it expecting to be able to cast Firaga?"

"All that line does is tell me you haven't read *Harry Potter.*"

My bombardment had failed.

Sadly, fire magic didn't seem to work on a Fire Sister.

Hey, it's just hard to start on a series if you're not there from the beginning.

"Or maybe it could be the other way around," I said.

"Hrmm?"

"In other words, we get inundated with these super-stylish, or at least super-dramatic romances in manga, anime, and dramas. So maybe it's made me think that something isn't romance unless it's at that kind of level. Maybe I want things to be so big and ostentatious that I've been overlooking the more subtle kinds of love hidden in my own life. In other words, I'm a victim of our information-overloaded age."

"I understand what you're saying and what you're trying to say, but the way you're saying it is still annoying because it feels like you're trying to shift the blame."

What victim? You hypocrite.

Saying so, Tsukihi lifted one leg and placed it on my shoulder where I sat. She'd probably wanted to step on my head but couldn't raise her leg that high.

She started grinding her foot into my shoulder.

I normally would have smacked her for this, but I was going to be magnanimous and ignore it, given the situation.

I won’t deny that perhaps I was being magnanimous at all the wrong moments.

“You can’t turn around and blame others, Koyomi. We’re all overloaded with information but still manage to have normal relationships.”

“Hmph. So that’s what you’re using now? Facts and logic?”

“Could we sum this discussion up by saying that you’re a loveless person?”

“Nope, nope, that’s not true. I’m full of love. In fact, you could call me a missionary for love. You know they call me Kanetsugu Naoe, right?”

“Who ever called you that?”

No one, that was who.

Not once.

“But,” Tsukihi said.

Her foot was still on my shoulder, if you were wondering. The fact that her sock was directly next to my face was, well, a complicated situation. It made me want to rub my cheek against it.

“My devotionless brother, it isn’t like–”

“That’s right! Nothing’s holy to me.”

“My devotionless brother, it isn’t like…” she repeated searchingly, tossing out my joke without a word.

We’d been living under the same roof for more than a dozen years, but I still couldn’t fathom her standards when it came to responding to my jokes.

“You’re not a misogynist or anything, are you?”

“Huh? What do you mean by that?”

“I’m asking to make sure you’re not trying to act like you hate girls.”

“Oh, no. Nothing like that. I’ve donned the hat of a world-weary misanthrope plenty of times in my life, but even then I would make special exceptions for women.”

“So you were making a special exception for more than half the population.”

“Oh, right.”

Just to be clear, this part was me trying to be funny. I never made such an exception, nor ever donned the hat of a world-weary misanthrope to begin with. I just couldn’t bring myself to be earnest and honest when I was talking to my little sisters. It wasn’t possible for me to have an entirely serious conversation with them.

But, well.

It wasn’t like I’d ever acted like some rough-and-tumble guy with no time or interest in women, either.

I wasn’t a misogynist, and I didn’t think I had a problem dealing with women–at least, that’s what I thought (not confident enough to say for sure).

“Yup. I guess not,” Tsukihi agreed. “I mean, you might not have ever brought anyone to our house, but you used to always play with the friends Karen and I brought over.”

“Did I?”

“M-hm. My friend and you were like love-doves.”

“What, me? Love? Dove?”

I’d practically been a shampoo commercial. That was like striking gold.

“That must have been the first and last time in your life that you naturally attracted girls.”

“So I’d gone through such a period. A *moteki*… Oh, whatever.”

Now that she mentioned it, I did have some memories somewhere in my brain of playing Life and other games with a royal procession of her friends who used to stream into our home.

If there was an odd number of them, counting Tsukihi, I’d get dragged in to make it even.

But that was in the past.

I didn’t even feel nostalgic about those days.

“Either way, I don’t hate women. My policy in life has been to avoid any semblance of choosiness.”

That was me.

Cool and dry, someone with a personality you could compare to the Tottori Sand Dunes. For me to feel shaken the way I did now was a huge deal when you thought about it, a regular paradigm shift.

“And so you’ve come to me for romantic advice.”

“Yeah. That’s right. And also, I know I’ve gone on for a while, but it’s not like I’m hoping for a comprehensive answer. I just wanted to ask if you’d heard about any similar cases, for my own reference. How about your boyfriend–um, Rosokuzawa, was it?”

“Yup. You remember. I’m impressed.”

“Just his name.”

It’s not like I’ve met him.

It wasn’t that I remembered his name, more that I only knew his name.

“At what point did you judge that you liked him? That’s what I really want to hear from you.”

“Well, I guess–”

Tsukihi hesitated, pouted, and went quiet.

She seemed less stumped than embarrassed.

Cute little bugger.

Maybe I’d give her a smooch.

“–It just kinda happened,” she said.

“It just kind of happened.”

“Yeah. It was vague. Random.”

“And you’re okay with that?”

“I’m okay with that. That’s how it is.”

Her comments sounded outright offhanded by the end. It must have been her trying to hide her embarrassment in part, but it also seemed like she’d scrapped her attempt at an explanation.

So she’d given up?

Given up on her brother?

What a sad state of affairs this was.

Not knowing when to quit, I protested, “Fine, then putting aside for now the question of when, could we start with you telling me why? What made you like Rosokuzawa?”

“That just kinda happened, too.”

There was no hesitation this time, but it was another offhanded reply, in an irritated tone.

Maybe she didn't want to talk about herself too much–which was fair enough, yet it seemed selfish after the deep (?) conversation we'd been in.

"Well, it really did just kind of happen. It sorta kinda just happened, sorta," Tsukihi explained sulkily.

It sorta kinda just happened, sorta.

"I thought that I might like him, and then I felt that I liked him, and then I knew I liked him. That's how it went."

"There's such a thing as being too subtle," I complained.

What parody of a grammar lesson was that?

How was I supposed to see how it'd gone?

"If you really want a reason," added Tsukihi, "there are plenty of things I could say to make you happy. Like that he's cool, or that he's kind, or that he's tall, or that he's rich. I could give you all kinds of reasons."

"....."

The fact that being rich was on her list seemed to say a lot about her as a person.

That wasn't the point here, though.

If anything, it was what she said next.

"But all of that is a lie, just a self-serving attempt to understand my feelings rationally. They wouldn't be reasons but rationalizations. It'd be like starting from the conclusion that I like him and building myself a ladder to get there."

"A ladder."

"Maybe a rocket, not a ladder. Yeah, like I'm building myself a rocket." Tsukihi struck her palm with her fist–apparently happy with

her analogy. The fair thing to do would have been to consult me first, but she wasn't that kind of person. "If you think you want to be with someone forever, you're probably in love. Koyomi, have you heard this saying before?"

"What saying?"

"He who loves a toad will look at a toad and see the moon."

"…Nope, never."

But I didn't have to think hard to understand what she meant.

There was no simpler proverb about love.

If you fall in love with someone, the reasons don't matter–that's what Tsukihi was telling me, and it made sense in that light.

She'd made a rocket to fly herself to the moon.

True, questions like "Why do you like him" and "What do you like about him" might have been off the mark. And she'd feel there was something similarly wrong about the "when" question.

It wasn't anything that precise.

It was fuzzy.

"…Well, I get it, it's because I'm always theorizing about it that I've never been able to like anyone."

"Calling you devotionless is going too far, but loving people and loving a person are opposites in some ways."

"They are?"

"Yeah. Loving humanity ends up meaning the same thing as not falling in love with anyone. Love might be fair and just, but that's not romance. You could even say that choosing an irreplaceable someone amounts to discrimination. Humanitarianism and discrimination don't go together, do they?"

Maybe you're a humanitarian, Tsukihi said.

Guh.

For some reason–that didn't feel like praise.

She might have been saying something nice, but I don't know–it somehow reminded me of spring break.

Specifically–

What my humanitarianism over spring break resulted in.

I couldn't keep the memories from pestering me.

"Loving all of humanity would make you a saint–but could you imagine a saint getting worked up over romance?"

"No, I can't."

I couldn't see a saint being so worldly.

Hmph.

Calling it discrimination was taking it too far, but romance was a worldly thing, and it had to be.

It wasn't love for all mankind.

Not at all.

"If there was someone who could fall in love with every human being on the planet," Tsukihi mused, "I guess that would be unbeatable."

"Someone who pined for humans as a whole? Yeah, that'd be difficult. Actually, not difficult, but absurd."

"In fact, on face value he just sounds like a very fickle adulterer."

"Hmph."

Well, extreme examples wouldn't get us anywhere.

I needed to put concepts and definitions aside for now.

If we let this discussion get too broad, we'd never be able to wrap it up.

We were talking about my classmate Miss H.

"Anyway, you may be right that I'm a sad man who's never fallen in love with anyone from the day he was born, but now I, Koyomi Araragi, at the age of eighteen, at long last, may have done just that."

"No! Don't say 'may have,' say it as a fact!" Tsukihi bent over and slammed both of her palms into my shoulders as if to encourage me. Then with an energized smile she declared, "You did have done just that!"

"I…did have?"

"My brother has fallen in love! It's settled!"

"It is?!"

"That's right! Your mindset is now set!" Tsukihi swooped in toward my face and smacked her forehead against mine. We were so uncomfortably close that I could feel her breath. "You're in love with Miss H., I've decided for you!"

"If you've decided it, there's nothing I can do!"

The pressure was too much for me. I had no choice but to nod along.

No, I wouldn't say I had no choice.

"……"

Yeah, I guess so.

Tsukihi was right.

Well, I still had no idea if she was–but I'd go ahead and listen to her.

What was wrong with saying that maybe liking actually meant liking?

I thought that I might like her.

I felt that I liked her.

So I knew I liked her.

I wanted to be with her forever.

That was probably what this feeling was.

"Okay, Tsukihi, I've made a breakthrough thanks to you. And that's something, considering what a broken kid I am. Looks like I'd underestimated you."

"No, no, no, no. You paint me badly in a good light!"

Looking embarrassed, Tsukihi smiled and waved her hand back and forth in front of her face.

It was human nature to want to embarrass her even more after seeing such an adorable reaction.

Or maybe not human nature, but an older brother's nature.

Blushing little sisters are cute!

So *moé*!

"You're the best sister ever, Tsukihi!"

"Oh you! I'm not!"

"I always knew that you'd do something great one day. To think that day was today! You're on Marilla's level already, and you're not even fifty! I can't believe how fast you've managed to evolve. You've got such a huge presence about you now that I don't know if I'll even be able to remember who that Karen girl is!"

“Ahahaha!”

“You aren’t my sister for nothing.”

“Huh? Did you just switch over into praising yourself?” asked Tsukihi, snapping back to her senses.

So she’d caught me out. What a sharp girl.

My plan had been to keep going until I’d trained her to be a little sister who was delighted whenever her older brother got praised, but it looked like my plans had been dashed.

She also hadn’t flinched one bit at being elevated at Karen’s expense. Perhaps it was something to note down as an issue.

But jokes aside.

“Allow me to say thank you, Tsukihi.”

“Oh, it was something.”

After all, it was the first time I’d ever been asked such an elementary question, Tsukihi said, sounding relieved. “And I know I just said a lot, but really, coming to like someone is about as natural as a dog barking. There’s no need to worry yourself sick over it.”

“Oh? So it’s natural.”

“Yeah. It’s normal.”

“So it’s normal for there to be a girl in my class I’m interested in?”

“It’s normal!”

“And it’s normal for me to spend more time in class looking at her than at the blackboard?”

“It’s normal!”

“And for me to look for her on the way to school, and for me to wonder if I’ll be able to run into her, and for me to imagine all sorts of things when I buy books?!”

“It’s normal!”

“And for me to want to fondle her breasts?!”

“No.”

The conversation came to a halt.

“Hm?”

“Hm?”

We traded looks, each trying to figure out what the other might be thinking.

Neither of us could figure out why the conversation had come to a halt.

“Huh? Wait, what? What are you saying, Tsukihi?”

“Huunh?! I-I’m the one with the problem here?”

“Maybe you should be down here with me on your knees.”

“Oh, all right then.”

Still confused, Tsukihi sat on her knees.

Now brother and sister were both on their knees as they faced one another.

What was this, a tea ceremony?

People often forget this character detail, but Tsukihi was in the tea club.

“Well, so what I’m saying is that Miss H. has a very attractive chest, and I end up thinking about how much I want to touch and grope it. That’s what I’m trying to discuss.”

“Hm? Maybe I’m stupid or something. For whatever reason, I understand the words you’re speaking but can’t make out what they mean. The only two answers to what you said that come to mind are ‘Come again?’ and ‘Go away.’”

“What? God, you’re hopeless. You know it’s not easy on me having such a failure as a sister.”

My assessment of her had done another 180. My flip-flopping was so blunt it was amazing, if I do say so myself.

“This is a little-known fact in my class, or actually I think I’m the only one to know,” I elaborated, “but she’s actually got huge breasts. How could you not fondle those?!”

“I’m sorry, Koyomi, but could you please stop using crude words like ‘grope’ and ‘fondle’?”

“Huh? Oh.”

I, in my magnanimity, decided to honor her request.

“Okay, then. How could you not grab those?!”

“You’ve gone from crude to rude now.”

I don’t know, Tsukihi surrendered herself to dejection.

I was starting to get the impression that the way she looked at me was not the way she’d look at her brother but rather at a pervert.

Was I mistaken?

Yes, it had to be an illusion.

Trick art was all the rage these days, wasn’t it?

“So in other words,” I said, “I’m obsessed with the idea of touching Miss H.’s chest. That’s love, right?”

“No.”

Tsukihi stood firm and shot me down.

She sounded so steadfast that it nearly made me want to give up advocating my position.

Guh.

She was so damn stubborn.

Yet I clenched my fists and boldly challenged her. “You wouldn’t think about wanting to touch a chest belonging to someone you don’t like, would you? That’s why I think this has to be love.”

“If that’s what you honestly think, I’m going to have to start feeling responsible for making you believe that…”

I loved the expression that she wore. She looked like an archaeologist who had awakened an evil god of destruction sealed away by an ancient tribe.

Just as long as this responsibility she was feeling didn’t drive her to end things by her own hands.

“Even that Rosokuzawa kid you like so much is thinking all the time about how much he wants to touch your chest.”

“I’m sure he does, but in set theory terms, that’s what you’d call a proper class. Rosokuzawa wants to touch every girl’s boobs in the world, including mine!”

“……”

That was one guy I didn’t care to meet.

Actually, I didn’t know about Tsukihi, either. How was she able to yell something like that at the top of her lungs?

“So, Koyomi. It’s a natural feeling for boys to want to touch girls’ boobs, and you don’t have to worry about it.”

“……”

It felt like she was giving me advice on an entirely different topic now.

We’d gone from romantic advice to sex ed.

“I did say no, but it’s normal in another sense,” my sister assured me.

“Is it, now.”

“Yes. It’s obvious.”

“Obvious.”

“It’s not love, it’s sexual desire.”

“Desire!”

Desire, huh…

That sounded wanting.

“Or rather, it’s precisely wanting.”

“Don’t talk like a classic raconteur delivering one of those punning punch lines.”

“Oh, I thought it was just right, good enough to end the chapter on, in fact. Are we really going to continue?”

“Yeah. We can’t end on that. There are some things here that are over, though. Like you.”

“What do you mean? My life is just getting started.”

“I meant your humanity. Ugh, and while I did do this half as a joke, the other half of me was really trying to give you serious advice.

I never imagined I'd have to answer questions from my own big brother about his brimming libido."

"Excuse me, my libido? Are you saying that about the honest questions I was asking you?"

And she was doing it half as a joke?

This was no laughing matter.

"But isn't that what it is? There's a girl in your class and you're interested in her boobs, and you spend more time in class looking at her boobs than you do the blackboard, and you look for her boobs on the way back from school, and you always imagine her boobs when you go to the bookstore. If that's not lust, then what is it?"

"Hold on, you swapped out a bunch of my words there."

A huge find-and-replace had just been committed on me.

Or maybe a search-and-destroy.

"When you put it like that, then it's lust, not love, and the guy is a pervert, not your brother, but Tsukihi, you need to keep in mind how mistaken your assumptions can get. I'm almost certain that you've misunderstood."

"Have I?"

"Yes. Don't get the wrong idea. I'll concede a whole mile to you and say that my clean and pure emotion of wanting to touch Miss H.'s chest is lust. A pure kind of lust. After hearing all of that from you, I won't hesitate to admit that this lust has at least something to do with the issue that I'm facing. I will defer to you, my little sister. But what do you think about this, Tsukihi?"

I paused for a moment. Then, in a firm voice, I spoke my prepared line.

"Isn't it impossible for love to exist without lust?"

“Shut up. Oh, sorry. It seems that I somehow picked the wrong comeback there. Die.”

That is the most ridiculous thing in the world and how dare you act like it’s some wise saying, spat Tsukihi, clicking her tongue.

How uncouth.

Whatever happened to that bit about her being in the tea club?

“I’m not going to die. Sorry, but your big brother is immortal.”

“You’re immortal? Well, I’m immortal too.”

Seriously… she sighed.

Are you seriously serious? she sighed.

Still sitting, Tsukihi skillfully shuffled her knees back and forth and drew closer to me.

Closed the distance, you might say.

“What do you want?”

“I thought I’d try something.”

“Really, now? You want to try your big brother?”

“Yes, now that I know what kind of big brother he is.”

Stopping just before our kneecaps collided, Tsukihi thrust her chest out toward me.

“Come on. Touch them.”

I touched them.

Without a sound from my mouth. Without an expression on my face.

With immediate resolve and immediate execution, I touched them immediately.

“AAAGH!”

Maybe it was my speed, surely on par with the speed of light, that surprised Tsukihi. She screamed and nearly fell backwards, but if she’d continued on her trajectory, she would have hit her head on the corner of the bed behind her, and so I clenched my hands to somehow keep her upright.

Well, yes.

That is to say, I’d clamped down into Tsukihi’s chest so hard that my fingers were digging into it.

This was no longer a touch, it was a catch.

“That hurts!!”

What an ingrate.

I’d narrowly saved her from smashing the back of her head on my bed. You could say I’d saved her life; yet her body rose up toward me like a pendulum at an incredible velocity, and she head-butted me.

Forehead struck forehead.

Fireworks exploded in my visual field.

But I still didn’t let go of Tsukihi’s chest.

Her chest was the lifeline keeping me from flying backwards.

“I said that hurts! Let go! Leggoleggoleggo!!”

“Le goal? Oh, are you practicing to be a soccer announcer? But why in French?”

“If you have the time to be thinking up stupid jokes, why haven’t you let go?!”

“Let go? As in, let go of common sense?”

“You’ve clearly done that already! I mean it in the more common way, you moron!”

There was no need for her to call me a moron. As soon as I was able to raise my fallen body, I released the protrusions into which I'd hooked my fingers.

"What is your problem, what is your problem, what is your problem?! Putt is your wroblem?! Agh, and now my words are getting jumbled together."

Her rage was acute, and cute.

"There wasn't a moment of hesitation just now, was there? You came to grab them the moment I said it. The way you reacted, it was like the words bypassed your brain and went straight to your spine."

"How rude. No brother would ever fondle his little sister's chest."

"You just did! With everything you have!!"

"Nope, nope. It's the opposite, in fact. Think outside the box. It was your chest that groped my palms."

"How are you able to come up with such a disgusting sentence?!"

"What a perverted sister you are, coming and fondling your biological brother's hands with your chest."

"Inside or outside the box, who thinks such a thing…"

Fondling someone's palms with your chest? she asked.

Tsukihi had her hands against her temples.

I noticed that neither of us was sitting on our knees, probably as the result of our little slapstick dispute.

The balance had collapsed at last.

"I can't believe you, Koyomi! You shouldn't touch your little sister's boobs so much!"

“What? Why are you getting mad at me? You’re the one who told me to touch them. I could even say that you seduced me.”

“Seduced.”

“By the way, have you ever read the word ‘seduced’ in a font that made it look like ‘secluded’?”

“That’s a keen-eyed observation, but you’re not getting me sidetracked! If you think I’m just going to sit here and take this, you’re dead wrong. I’m going to Karen and telling her about every little thing that happened here!”

“Don’t. There won’t be anything left of my original form.”

I would be pummeled.

Karen got mad whenever someone bullied Tsukihi.

I demanded, “Would you be able to live with yourself if the base of Karen’s fingers got scratched up in the process?!”

“How can you say something that lame in such a proud voice?” Tsukihi glared at me, and hers were the eyes of a killer. “Maybe there shouldn’t be anything left of your original form. I’ll come back tomorrow to wake you up with a crowbar again.”

“It’s pointless. Unfortunately for you, weapons don’t work on me.” I laughed through my nose at Tsukihi’s threat. “I’m a nonexistent youth. I’m protected by certain ordinances.”

“How…cool?!”

Well.

I hadn’t done a thing to be ashamed of, but I was afraid that there could be a misunderstanding.

Or not a misunderstanding, exactly. It was Karen I was afraid of.

“Fine, then,” I said. “No getting sidetracked. I’m going to rehash and revisit the topic, okay? You were the one who seduced me, saying, ‘Come on. Touch them.’”

“What pisses me off more than anything is your awful impression! It didn’t sound like me at all!”

Tsukihi Araragi was in hysteria mode.

What a hystery novel this was turning out to be.

……

No, that wasn’t good enough of a punch line, either.

As much as I wanted to move on to the next segment, a chapter couldn’t end on that.

“My voice sounds more like Yuka Iguchi!”

“Don’t use a real person’s name,” I scolded.

“And I never seduced you or anything!”

“Yes you did. You stuck your chest out all like, ‘Why don’t you reach out…and touch somebody?’”

“Don’t turn me into some lame, airheaded character! No one ever requested that! Stop it, don’t you know some people are starting the series with this installment?!”

“Uh-oh. If they really are, I ought to be worried about my favorability rating.”

I’d thought I was in safe territory with all of this joking around because we were working off of six previous volumes. I was going on this rampage on the presumption that everyone already knew all the great things about me.

“Be careful about the way you act, Koyomi. We even have readers in Nebula M78 by now.”

“You’re right…”

This could turn into a cosmic issue.

It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that Earth’s fate now rested on my shoulders.

“So, what, Koyomi, would you touch just anyone’s chest if they asked you to?”

“Hold on, do you see me as that immodest of a person? I can’t believe you,” I said in my best exasperated tone. “You can provoke me all you want with lines like that, but the only chests I’m going to touch are Miss H.’s and yours.”

“I’m in a special category together with Miss H.?!”

“Wait, no. Karen too.”

“You even want to put your filthy hands on her? Really? Hold on, is it okay for us to be thinking of you as family?”

“You’ve got it all wrong. It’s because we’re family that I feel this way,” I explained in the simplest terms possible for my comprehension-challenged sister. “Putting aside Miss H., the only reason I’d say that to you two is because I’m your brother.”

“Wh-What is that supposed to mean?”

“To a boy, his little sister’s chest doesn’t count as a chest. Which is to say that a boy can touch his little sister’s chest all he wants and it still won’t count as having touched a chest. So I can touch your chest all I want.”

“Forget whether or not I should think of you as family, that syllogism is so ridiculous, I don’t know whether I should call you human.”

You’ve leapt right out of the box, Tsukihi groaned.

It seemed that I hadn’t been able to make her understand.

How sad.

Perhaps humans are doomed never to understand one another.

Despite all the advances in communications technology, we still can’t share our thoughts and trust in each other?

But Tsukihi refused to be discouraged by the social satire in my narration, and her drooping head popped up, testifying to her stout heart and bold spirit. Life remained in her eyes. It seemed she wanted to continue protesting.

Talk about obstinate.

Why wouldn’t she die already?

I decided to strike first before Tsukihi could say something obnoxious.

“For argument’s sake, let’s say your chest is an inviolable object. But you, its owner, gave me permission to touch it. So how can you blame me?”

When it came down to it, the earlier slapstick bit started because she’d suggested it.

That was its genesis, after all.

“No!”

But Tsukihi was persistent.

“No! No! That was me being tsundere!”

“Excuse me?”

Sorry, how?

I’m fairly well-versed in the subject, even without bringing up Marilla, but I didn’t see a shred of such an inclination in what Tsukihi had said earlier.

“See, now I’m the one thinking outside the box!” my sister exclaimed. “I’m not a slave to any of your adult rules and regulations!”

“Well, you need to be.”

Especially the adult ones.

She was on thin ice there.

They’ve been cracking down a lot, lately. If we’re going to be titillating, we need to play by the rules.

“In other words, I’m a reverse tsundere!”

“And what exactly is that?”

“In other words, I’m normally all lovey-dovey and act like we’re really close, and I’m fine with physical contact like putting my hand on your shoulders or putting my face close to yours, but when you see that and wonder if I like you and confess your feelings to me, I suddenly transform into a cold, mean girl and snub you with a ‘Oh, no, it’s not like that. Please stop, really. What have you misunderstood here? Don’t get carried away.’”

“……”

No, that wasn’t tsundere or reverse tsundere.

Wasn’t that called being a pretty common kind of regular girl?

“As a reverse tsundere, I’ll joke around and say, ‘Come on, touch them,’ but if you really do touch them, that means I’ll get snap on you, like ‘Oh my god, what are you doing?! What are you, stupid?!’”

“That’s horrifying.”

These reverse tsunderes were scary.

How was I supposed to approach them?

“Actually, what were you even trying to do there?” I asked. “Where did you think the conversation would go when you thrust your chest out in front of me?”

“Well, that was me playing around, or maybe trying something out. I told you I was trying something, remember? As the brains of the Fire Sisters, my plan was to thrust my chest at you so you’d say, ‘No, I’m not interested in your chest’ in order to justify your theory, but I’d shoot back with ‘That’s because it’s your little sister’s chest, right?’ It was supposed to be a beautiful little rally between us.”

“Oh. That was how it was supposed to go?”

“Why did you have to hit a beautiful little return ace?”

I can’t believe you, Tsukihi said, puffing her cheeks.

It seemed like we had slightly different ideas about our intimacy as siblings.

“But touching your chest there would make for a funnier scene than that kind of dime-a-dozen exchange.”

“Hmm. I guess you’re right. Okay, I forgive you.”

She forgave me.

This must have been why she was able to draw so many people to her and why she was such a leader, but at the same time I was worried that she might be a little too charitable.

“So, how was it?” asked Tsukihi.

“Hm?”

“I’m asking you how it was.”

“Oh. I see, you want to know how I felt touching my little sister’s boobs.”

It was something you’d want to know.

It’s natural to mind what others think about something you’ve spent many months nurturing.

This was no time for me to pay her any kind of easy lip service. I thought for a bit before giving her my honest opinion.

“Seventy-six points. Room for improvement!”

“Subtle!”

We needed to give it time.

Then again, the scorer had only ever touched his little sister’s chest and no one else’s. His grading standards lacked credibility.

“So what’s going to happen now?” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you told me, ‘Touch them ’ere,’ and I touched them.”

“Cut it out with your grating impressions!”

“This something-or-other you were trying–what kind of conclusion were you led to?”

“Um…”

Tsukihi considered my question. It was a strange reaction, as if she’d been completely unprepared until the moment I asked it.

Maybe she just wanted me to grope her boobs?

Don’t get me wrong, it’s not like I actually groped them.

In fact, it was my palms that had been groped by her chest.

The world’s most shocking massage.

“Koyomi, I think you might be feeling sexually frustrated.”

“What?!” She’d been led to the worst possible conclusion.

“Now that I think about it, you were lamenting, ‘I can’t buy dirty magazines, I can’t buy dirty magazines, I can’t buy dirty magazines!’”

“I didn’t say it three times.”

Why would I chant that?

I’d simply misspoken.

Simply blurted out how I really felt.

“But that’s what’s backfiring,” Tsukihi said. “It’s doing the complete opposite of what you want. You’ve confused sexual desire for romance, and you’re creating an inflationary spiral of frustration.”

“An inflationary spiral?”

What was that? Though I’d heard of deflationary spirals before.

“Geez, an inflationary spiral… You’re telling me some *007*-ish phenomenon is taking place inside my head?”

“M-hm. And that’s why you went ahead and touched your little sister’s chest.”

“So that’s why I touched that touch panel of a chest…”

“Those are flat!”

She struck me.

I would have gone flying into the wall had I been dealing with Karen, but this was an attack coming from Tsukihi’s slender arm. A mosquito bite would have hurt more.

So I decided to keep going.

“Hah. It’s a touch panel used to enter the secret code of romance.”

“That’s not even clever!”

“Then I withdraw all your savings.”

“Nice one!”

As furious as Tsukihi was, when it came to judging jokes she was fair, being my little sister.

“This is a problem,” she noted. “It’s okay because it was just my chest, but if you get any more frustrated, you might put your hands on the chest of your true love, Miss H.”

“Hmm, you think I might literally put my hands on her… And wait, did you just say that your chest was okay?”

“It was better than okay, wouldn’t you say?”

“It wasn’t bad.”

What kind of conversation was this?

“But,” I said, “if that’s the argument you’re going to make, then Miss H. would be thrusting her chest out in front of me and inviting, ‘Come on. Touch them’…”

She would never.

I couldn’t even imagine it.

“No, no, Koyomi, you’re the kind of person who’d strike off on his own and touch them even without her invitation. You’d devise some kind of plan. ‘Let’s play tag! You’re it if you get touched anywhere on your body!’ or something.”

“What a transparent plan…”

“Or maybe it’d be a game of tag, only instead of a light pole being the safe zone, it’d be Miss H.’s brassiere.”

“Forget transparent. You know, if anything here is flat, it’s the way these so-called plans are falling.”

Well.

The more I thought about it, the more they did seem like the kinds of plans I'd devise.

I nodded slowly as if I were digesting her words.

Oh. So I was frustrated.

It was a mean thing to say, and it did wound me (;_;), but yes, now that she'd brought it up, I sort of agreed with her.

Actually, I simply agreed with her.

I might even say that she hit it right on the mark.

Did a culprit exposed by a famed detective feel the same way? No wonder they were always so sportsmanlike about it.

Boy, I was almost feeling refreshed.

So that's what it was. Sexual frustration.

"Ah, of course. That's what this is."

"M-hm. That was a real close one. You nearly mistook being attracted to the chest of a classmate whom you don't particularly fancy for love."

"Gotcha, gotcha. Now that would've been one big wrong idea to get."

"I'm sure Miss H. absolutely wouldn't want you getting it."

"Guh."

True.

Not only would I have mistaken lust for love, I'd have gone on to tell her about the way I thought I felt. What would we have done about that?

It would have been a disaster.

Even so.

Even so, *considering Miss H.'s personality*–she might have put up with such a disaster.

And that was why.

Why I needed to control myself.

Why I had to.

"Right. Tsukihi, you saved me from a close one there. I almost let my actions lead me down the path of evil."

"The path of evil…"

"Kaahahaha! Indeed, how I've erred–I, Koyomi Araragi, the Sixth Demon King, must never consort with a simple lass!"

"You sound like some sorcerer who's already been led down the path of evil…"

And what's with that laugh? muttered Tsukihi.

"Asuraman," I replied. "So, now that we've arrived at a conclusion, it's time to come up with a plan to address this. It's going to be bad if I left this frustration to fester. I have to protect Miss H. from my wicked talons."

"True."

"It's a godsend that I saw the truth of the matter–if a touch late."

"True."

I'd uttered the first words that had come to mind, but she took a pass on it.

There were apparently some things that I shouldn't say even to my little sister.

“Koyomi, let’s avoid a punch line where you put your wicked talons on Miss H. and get arrested and groan, ‘Aw shucks! This is the last time I bother with boooobs!’”

“I don’t think the scene would end in such a jocular mood if I got apprehended by the police…”

“And I don’t want there to be a criminal in my family, either. It’d be a blot on the name of the Fire Sisters. All of the trust we’ve spent our time building up will vanish into thin air.”

“Hmm. Yes, you do hear people say that it’s not capable enemies you should be scared of, but incompetent allies.”

“I think I’d say catastrophic allies in this case, not incompetent.”

“You might.”

Hold on, I wasn’t the Fire Sisters’ ally in the first place.

Some people did seem to put me in a Sixth Ranger kind of position (They apparently call me the Fire Brother. Talk about lame!), but I didn’t have any recollection of ever donning a silver suit and doing battle, even metaphorically.

“Oh well, I guess I’ll have to fondle your boobs or Karen’s when I feel like it as a palliative treatment to tide me over.”

“That treatment can never happen!”

“Why not? Don’t you two Fire Sisters fight for justice? You ought to be jumping at the chance to sacrifice yourselves for me.”

“Maybe the just thing to do here would actually be to sacrifice you.”

No way you’re fondling my boobs just to kill time, muttered Tsukihi.

“Then what are you going to do?” I demanded. “Either Miss H., an innocent civilian, is getting touched, or you sisters are. It’s one or the other.”

“If those are the only choices, then… Gaahh! Fine, you can touch us!”

The Sisters were so full of the spirit of self-sacrifice.

The creeps.

“Do as you please with our chests, but promise you won’t lay a finger on Miss H.!”

“Okay, I promise. Not just Miss H., in fact. So long as you two sacrifice yourselves for me, I don’t care if I run into an irresistibly cute, pigtailed, lost elementary schooler with a backpack on in the future–I swear I’ll never hug her from behind or anything!”

“Why such a specific example?”

“I’m not sure.”

How strange.

I could only tilt my head in wonderment.

A cosmic will was making itself known.

“Then again,” I said, “I think promises ought to be as specific as possible. They’ll be easier to keep.”

“I see. So you’ll never break that promise, no matter what.”

“Sure.”

Why?

The future wasn’t set in stone, so why did it already feel like I was telling a lie?

“And anyway, those wouldn’t be the only choices.”

“Yeah.”

Of course not.

Touching your sister’s chest wasn’t anyone’s idea of a funny punishment.

“There are a lot of ways to deal with sexual frustration without setting your eyes on your little sister’s chest,” stated Tsukihi. “That’s like a method of last resort.”

“Last or not, better not resort to it at all.” In which case–we needed to think about the best way out of all the other methods to relieve my frustration.

“I think the usual thing to do is to get really involved in a sport, or maybe to find some indoor hobby that’ll be your passion.”

“Sports, huh. I should’ve gone jogging with Karen or something.”

“Three-legged, too.”

“Yeah, like in a three-legged–wait, why?!” I’d probably end up getting dragged along and looking like a bride’s veil at a wedding ceremony.

“Nope, this is Karen we’re talking about. She’d run fast enough for you not to be dragged.”

“So fast I’d float behind her?!”

Sounded like ninja training.

Truth be told, that was a more likely path for Karen than becoming a bride.

Ugh, she’d made me reply like a real straight man for the first time in a while.

“No sports,” I ruled out. “I feel inferior enough to Karen.”

“What a small person…” a scornful comment escaped Tsukihi’s lips. I didn’t know if she meant that with regards to my mind or my body.

Probably both. “So an indoor hobby.”

“Yeah. You don’t seem to be playing video games lately.”

“Ah, recent games. Or maybe not recent, but new games? They all have so many connected features and online battles that even if you play alone, you can’t figure out half of the fun the creators were trying to put into it.”

“Oh. Like StreetPass?”

“That’s part of it.”

Not that you’d pass anyone on the street out where we lived in the middle of nowhere.

You congregated by the arcade machines at the department store.

What a lame attraction.

“Knowing the fun’s going to be limited makes it hard for me to get excited.”

“You know we do have an internet connection in this house. Why not play downstairs?”

“No, you don’t understand. I’m someone who wants to play games alone to begin with.”

I hate versus cabinets, I intoned. I didn’t want any challengers storming into my heart.

“I doubt anyone who can only play games by themselves would ever find love,” Tsukihi alluded to our past topic with feeling. “Fine then,” she said. “Grope your little sister’s boobs.”

“We’re already down to the last resort?!”

“Oops. My mistake.”

“I have a feeling that everything we’ve done here has been a mistake.”

“Fine then,” Tsukihi repeated. “Just go buy some dirty magazines.”

“……”

So that was her conclusion?

“You’ve been hesitant to buy them for a month now because your misunderstanding made you conscious of how it’d look to Miss H., right? Knowing you, I can even imagine you bundling up all the treasures you’ve kept hidden away and tossing them out to ‘reset your mind and body.’”

“H-How did you guess?”

I seemed to have a very perceptive little sister.

Or my actions were just that predictable?

“That’s what made your frustration grow, which is why you should buy some new dirty magazines to solve the problem.”

“Hmm.”

I’d been offended at first, but now it was starting to sound like a good idea. Perhaps it went past a palliative treatment into removing the root cause.

It promised to be a radical cure.

Right.

Who needs love so long as you have dirty magazines?

This settled everything.

In fact, hadn't Tsukihi and I just solved the world itself?

That said, being a solution to the world, our philosophy also threatened to lead humanity to extinction.

"I see… So you're recommending reading as a form of companionship."

"Yeah, read with your whole heart. Read until you leave the pages creased and marked."

"Wow, make that two things you've made me realize today. No wonder you have a perfect record when it comes to solving people's romantic troubles. I thought we were never going to get to the punch line, but now the end of this chapter is finally in sight."

"That's right. We've gone on for so long that this would probably take three episodes of anime to cover, but it's finally time to move on to the next chapter. So if you've made up your mind, strike while the iron is hot. Why don't you go right now? The bookstore is just about to open. I'll even go with you."

"No, I could never ask that much of you. You've already done more than enough for me. I'd feel guilty if I bothered you any more than I have."

The rest of this battle is mine to face alone, I said in an attempt to sound cool, but then the truth struck me.

"Oh, crap. Maybe I can't."

"Huh? Why not? Was there something wrong with my nice idea?"

"No, there's nothing wrong with your idea, it's just that I'm missing something indispensable to it."

"What? Like a soda stuck in a vending machine?"

“Indispensable, not undispensable.”

Hmm. Our system of having to say something stupid before moving on in a conversation took so much effort.

“Money,” I told her.

“Money?”

“I’m short on funds.”

You could call me a bearish trader.

Only three hundred and seventy-seven yen sat in my wallet–they say people who know exactly how much they have in their wallet have what it takes to be rich someday, but in this case I had so little that it was harder not to know.

“What did you waste it on? Didn’t Grandpa give you money as a birthday present the other day?”

“I spent it all on a game.”

“So you are buying games.”

She was right. Then again, complaining about things but doing them anyway was the way I lived.

“What game did you buy?”

“I pretended to buy *Idolm@ster* but really bought *Ice Climber.*”

“Why would you need to pretend… Oh, you’re such a handful. You know it’s not easy for a girl to have such a failure as an older brother,” Tsukihi said, getting me back for earlier.

She looked very satisfied with herself.

Yet I was the one who’d managed to buy a game with only three hundred and seventy-seven yen in my wallet left to spare. Tsukihi should have been thanking me for allowing her to look so smug.

“Fine. I’ll give you one of the books from my stash, or maybe Karen’s.”

“……”

I didn’t want to get a dirty magazine from my little sister. I didn’t know if that counted as a hand-me-down or a hand-me-up, but either way.

It would be pointless if our tastes didn’t match, and I couldn’t imagine anything worse than if our tastes did.

“…But I guess I might as well ask. What kind of books?”

“I feel like they’re quite varied, but generally speaking, cute boys with cute boys.”

“Great, I’ve heard enough.”

I cut it short.

I cut our rotten conversation short.

“Don’t you want to hear me out to the end?”

“I didn’t even want to hear the beginning.”

“Koyomi, it’s not cool to go around turning up your nose at people’s tastes without so much as hearing them out.”

“It’s okay to go around turning up your nose at people’s bad taste.”

“You haven’t even read them!” Tsukihi started to grumble and boo, pouting. She apparently wasn’t satisfied with my thinking. “I, for my part, would never be so prejudiced. I thoroughly check out your tastes before feeling grossed out by them.”

“Don’t check them out! And don’t feel grossed out, either!”

And here I’d thought she was just perceptive!

She’d been sweeping the whole house!

“To be honest, Koyomi, your tastes worry me.”

“Shut up!”

I didn’t want to hear that from her!

And this goes without saying, but my tastes and interests are as normal as can be!

Damn, I’d have to find a new hiding place…

I said, “You’re complaining I’ve never even read your kinds of books, but what if I had? As my sister, would you be okay with it?”

Tsukihi thrust her finger toward me. “A BL-fan big brother? Who wouldn’t go crazy for that?!”

No good.

It’s rotten. It was too late.

“I just don’t know what to do,” she had the nerve to add. “I may be a Fire Sister, but I’m going to get burned.”

Standing up, she strode out of my room without saying another word. Given how silent her exit was, she probably meant to be back soon.

She couldn’t have gotten mad all of a sudden, right? Because *your clothes piss me off!* or whatever?

That’d be pretty chilly between siblings, but fortunately it wasn’t the case, and she returned right away. When I took a closer look, I noticed three neatly folded thousand-yen bills in her hand.

Then Tsukihi offered them to me.

“Here. You can borrow this.”

“Wh-What?! Are you really bestowing this charity upon a wretch like me?!”

I began to abase myself in the blink of an eye.

It was shameless even by my standards.

“Yeah,” she replied. “Wait, no, I’m just letting you borrow this, okay? You haven’t used my touch panel to access my savings! You need to pay me back.”

“O-Of course! With plenty of interest on top! Within legal rate limits!”

“Very by the book, I see…”

“I’m a man who always repays his debts.”

“You know that line doesn’t sound so impressive when it’s a cash debt…”

When I thought about the picture we were painting, a boy sitting on his knees in front of his little sister to borrow money from her, it was the most pitiful tableau ever.

Perhaps the pity got to Tsukihi, too.

“And I don’t need interest,” she waived.

She really did.

“But I want to see you show your gratitude instead.”

“My gratitude?”

“I want you to bare your heart and feelings. ‘Thank you, I love you, Tsukihi!’”

With those words, she proceeded to take off her socks.

The way she took them off was far more erotic than it needed to be.

Then, standing on one leg like a character in a kung-fu movie, she raised and shoved the other in front of my nose. In her most intimidating voice, she said:

“Lick it.”

I licked it.

“Do you ever hesitate?!”

From there, she kicked my nose, again like we were in a kung-fu movie.

This actually hurt. The level of her attack went beyond trying to give me a nosebleed and could have broken my nose.

“What have you done?!”

“Hey, that’s my line!”

“No, it’s my line! And you’re never getting this one!”

“Gimme!!”

Gross, gross, gross, muttered Tsukihi, wiping down the foot she’d given me to lick, scrubbing as though to cleanse herself of a disgusting memory.

“Hey, don’t treat my tongue like it’s something dirty, that hurts my feelings. I only grudgingly licked it because you begged, ‘C’mon… Lick it.’”

“The only grudge here is the one I’m going to have over how enthusiastic you were! And that’s not even an impression of me anymore! Claiming that I ever said that is baseless slander!”

“If you don’t want your feet getting licked again, hand over that cash.”

“Now you’re threatening me!”

Tsukihi tossed the three thousand-yen bills into the air.

I ran over like a child flocking to candy and snatched them before they fell to the floor.

Flip, flip, flip.

I checked over the bills like a bank teller.

“Okay, then. That’s three thousand yen, paid in full.”

“Why are you treating me like I’m repaying a debt when I dipped into my paltry allowance to lend you money?”

“I’m sure you don’t trust me, so I’ll tell Mom and Dad to automatically deduct three thousand yen from my allowance this month and give it to you.”

“That’s very considerate of you, but if that’s how you see things, I wish you’d try harder to get your little sister to trust you.”

“I’ll keep that in mind going backwards,” I said, then checked my clock.

It was before ten.

Yes, a perfect time for some cycling.

I opened my dresser and started changing clothes yet again–now to go out. This morning had been like a fashion show.

“Hey, Koyomi.”

I started with my jeans, and as I got them on, Tsukihi stopped fiddling around on my desk to speak to me.

What could it be?

She’d given me her money. Why wouldn’t she hurry up and leave?

Not just my room, but the planet, while she was at it.

“When’d you start working out?”

“Huh?”

“Ottermode.” Tsukihi pointed at my stomach. “I guess I haven’t seen you naked in a while, but you didn’t always have abs like that.”

“Oh.”

I now had a six-pack. And I guess it was the first time I’d taken off my shirt in front of my sister in my current state.

I’d *become this way* during spring break, so–wow, I hadn’t taken my clothes off in front of Karen or Tsukihi for the past month.

How stupid of me!

I was so ashamed that I hadn’t shown my body to my sisters!

…Hold on, no.

What kind of a pervert was I?

And also, I was quipping at myself an awful lot this morning with lines like *What kind of a pervert am I?* Maybe that was the surest sign you were a pervert.

“I’ve actually been into abs lately.”

“I see. Into abs.”

“That’s right. I’m doing Billy’s Bootcamp, but just the ab workouts.”

“Why such an unbalanced plan…”

I of course couldn’t tell her the truth, so I gave her the first excuse I could think of to brush off her question. “I came up with a real gut-ripper of a joke and ended up like this while I was getting ready to unveil it to you two.”

“I see, it’s so funny you made yourself laugh…”

“Yep. You’d better start training your abs if you don’t want it to kill you.”

“With Billy’s Bootcamp or Core Rhythms?”

“No, my suggestion would be the Electric Slide.”

“The Electric Slide?!”

I gave her another excuse, about how it was a better fit for a girl as fashionable as her, and it seemed to work.

“Hmm, okay,” she nodded.

While Tsukihi was smart (though I’m not sure you still buy that characterization), she wasn’t the type to pry into every aspect of her brother’s affairs.

I asked her for help this time, and she answered. That was all.

“Okay, thanks for today,” I finally expressed my gratitude in a normal way once I’d put on a long-sleeved shirt. You could say I should have spoken those words sooner.

“Not at all, you’re welcome.”

“I’m heading out.”

“Be safe.”

When I looked at Tsukihi, she was lying on my bed again. It seemed like she meant to doze off. Coming from a person who’d interrupted someone else’s attempt to go back to sleep, it was terribly selfish, but since she’d helped me, I could at least provide her with a place to nap. She just needed to get rid of that crowbar.

Before I left, I asked Tsukihi one more thing.

“Tsukihi?”

“What.”

“I know that we came to the conclusion that it was all a misunderstanding, but do you think that even someone like me might fall in love some day?”

“I assume you would, if you’re human?”

“Okay.”

Hearing her reply, I closed the door to my room with a *good night.*

And then I smiled.

A faint smile.

Human, huh?

Boy, ever since spring break–I’d developed a reaction to any mention of a category that shouldn’t have meant anything.

Like abs.

It really was sidesplitting, in its own way.

“My intensity as a human? What an embarrassing joke, when I look back on it.”

To be strong.

Strength.

Spring break smashed such concepts, too–thanks to none other than Miss H.

Miss H. Miss H. Miss H.

“Kah–”

Just then, as my sneer was on the verge of turning into an Asuraman-esque burst of laughter.

“I’m back!”

I heard a voice.

It seemed that Karen had come back from her jog–faster than I expected. As you might guess from our family’s nickname for her, “The Bullet,” she tends to stay out for a long time once she leaves the house.

Her record to date was from sixth grade, when she announced that she was going to take a walk around the neighborhood and didn't come home for three days–she was found in Okinawa that time.

Who takes a walk across the ocean?

The police had to get involved, for Pete's sake.

"Welcome home!"

Though nothing but a nuisance when she was at home, I felt that maybe I should welcome her early return given what a hassle that incident had been.

Fine, I'd go over and say hi.

You might wonder who the hell I thought I was, but with that exclamation, I briskly descended the stairs and headed for our front door. There I found Karen Araragi, the tracksuited woman, sopping wet and taking off her shoes.

…?

Sopping wet?

"Hm? Is it, uh, raining outside or something? I was about to go out."

It wasn't like I'd looked out the window to check the weather, but I hadn't heard any rain, and to begin with, sunlight was coming into the house.

A sunshower?

"Oh, Koyomi. So you woke back up?"

Karen finished taking off her shoes, straightened them, and stepped onto the welcome mat. Or rather, she drenched the welcome mat.

“They say that only Estark can rival you when it comes to sleeping, so waking you up is a real ordeal. I was concerned about leaving it all up to Tsukihi, but hey, looks like she did a great job.”

“Well, I don’t know if I’d call it a great job…”

It felt like Tsukihi had paid a pretty big price even if she’d met her goal. Not only did she have to pose in her underwear, grope someone’s hands with her chest, and get someone to lick her feet, she even got ripped off for three thousand yen.

Somebody had put my dear little sister through such an ordeal.

Unforgivable.

“Yup, yup,” Karen said, “looks like the time when Tsukihi goes off and stands on her own has arrived. I feel lonely just thinking about it. Still, I gotta tell her she did good.”

“You should leave her alone. She’s in my room sleeping, having accomplished her mission. You can praise her after she wakes up. Anyway, Karen, did you not have an umbrella?”

“Hrnn?!” Karen’s eyes narrowed with suspicion. “What’s the matter? You almost never call us by our names. You said it’s too embarrassing, which is why it’s always ‘big little sister’ or ‘little little sister.’”

“Oh, that trait got annoying so I decided to get rid of it starting with this round.”

It’s not like anyone else liked me doing it in the first place.

I just had to grin and bear it.

“Huh, it feels like the timeline here is getting all topsy and turvy and higgledy and piggledy, but whatever.” Karen’s brain had the unfortunate characteristic of being unable to dwell on anything too complicated, which meant most of her thoughts concluded with a *whatever.* Instead of pursuing the issue of how I addressed her, she

said, “Nah, it’s not raining. Clear blue skies, just like the first day of Golden Week oughta be.”

“What? Then why are you so drenched? Did you fall into a swamp or something?”

“I may climb at times, but I never fall,” Karen said with a dashing look.

My little sister was more annoying than any tic.

“I may not fall, but all jokes fall flat around me,” she boasted.

“What a nightmarish character…”

“It’s like the term ‘social climber’ was made for me!”

“……”

Was she okay with that being the phrase made for her? I didn’t know what to say. She was too much of a masochist, both physically and mentally.

“I don’t care if you’re climbing or falling, just tell me why you’re drenched,” I backtracked. “Did Sailor Mars or someone chastise you in the name of her planet?”

“Don’t be stupid. She’s my buddy.”

“The only one being stupid here is you.”

“Well, this is sweat.”

See? she said, hugging me. It felt like my entire body had been wrapped in a fully soaked sponge.

In other words.

“Gross! My discomfort index is off the charts! For reals?! Ugh, you reek of sweat!”

S-Sweat?!

All of it?!

“Hey, hey, Koyomi. I can’t believe you’d tell a girl of a tender age that she reeks.”

“Let go-o-o-o! Aaaaagh! This goes beyond discomfort, it’s downright unpleasant!!”

I thrashed around with all my strength, but to no avail.

Unlike Tsukihi, I was dealing with Karen, my jockish, power-based little sister. I lacked the strength to shove her away.

“C’mere!”

Karen started rubbing her cheeks against mine. While her perspiration acted as a lubricant, making it an unusually smooth cheek rub, it still felt more like she was trying to grind the salt in her sweat into my face.

It was like the world’s worst facial scrub.

“S-Stop it, Karen! Think about the difference in height here! My face is getting stuck between your boobs right now!”

“What? Really? Oh gosh, I’m so-o-o embarrassed!!”

The moment I pointed this out, she got away from me with a bashful expression.

While my life had been spared, I was confounded by what did and didn’t embarrass her. How did you blush after giving that intense of a hug?

“That’s all sweat? Seriously? Well, yeah, I guess this really is sweat…”

I won’t say I was drenched, but I was awfully damp as a result of Karen’s hug. When I ladled off some of the moisture and inspected it with my tongue, I could tell it was nothing but authentic sweat.

“Don’t be licking your little sister’s sweat. You’re such a creep of a brother.”

“Not nearly as creepy as a little sister who comes back home looking like a monster you’d see by the riverbed.”

What was that *yokai* called again?

The Wet Woman?

That would be an amazingly straightforward name, though.

“Who gets that sweaty after going for a jog? Are you sure you weren’t fighting Godzilla or something while you were at it?”

“No, it’s because I don’t go jogging very often. I don’t know how hard I should run, and it seems like I was pacing myself wrong.”

“Huh.”

So she went jogging but ran at full speed?

Okay.

Still, it felt like the amount of water enveloping her body weighed more than her…

“That was a longer jog than I expected,” she said. “42.195 kilometers.”

“You ran a full marathon?!”

“Well, I went jogging like an Olympic torch runner to celebrate the start of Golden Week.”

“Torch runners don’t run 42.195 kilometers!”

She’d confused the torch relay for the actual Olympic marathon!

“Whaa? But they go from one country to another. Don’t they run at least that far?”

“They divide it into sections and get different people to run them, and anyway, if that were the case, 42.195 kilometers would be way too short!”

She had such a narrow view of the world.

This was the Olympics, not a neighborhood athletic meet.

“No, Koyomi, 42.195 kilometers was long.”

“Of course it is. Long enough to cause you to get soaked in sweat, at least.”

“Yep, I’m feeling it. More than I’ve ever felt anything. I know they say 42.195 kilometers, but I thought it’d only be like running ten hundred-meter dashes in a row.”

“……!”

Oh god oh god oh god oh god oh god!

Oh god was my sister stupid!

I was going to start shaking in fear!

“I see, I see, no wonder I’m tired. Now I understand why I’m so exhausted.”

An idiot who never got a thing was going on about how she understood.

I was so worried for her.

“So, Koyomi, where’s the finish line tape? You do have some ready for me, right?”

“Why the hell would I? What kind of guy expects his sister to go out and casually run a full marathon while he’s gone back to sleep?”

“Hm? That’s weird. I asked Tsukihi.”

“I doubt she took you seriously…”

That, or Tsukihi just ignored the request. She could be cold, even though the two of them got along. You could say she wasn't so obliging.

"Oh, fine," Karen said, "she doesn't always know how to close the deal. I guess she still needs me."

"I bet Tsukihi would hate to hear that from someone with an empty head full of nothing."

"But if there's no finish line, that means my run isn't over."

Oh, fine, Karen repeated before facing me.

"Could you make a ring around your head?" she requested.

"A halo? Like an angel?"

"No, no. Just a ring with your arms, like this."

"Ah."

I did as Karen demonstrated and held my arms and shoulders in the shape of a zero, though I didn't know why she wanted me to–

"Hup!"

She leapt off the floor.

Then, as if she were a high jumper performing a straddle, she passed through the loop I'd made.

She was like a dolphin.

Or maybe a lion bounding through a flaming hoop.

She brushed against the top of my head.

As if she were threading a needle–with the mobility of a hornet, she slipped through my arms.

“There!” she declared, pulling off a perfect landing, “I’ve passed through my brother! I can say I’ve reached my goal!”

“Don’t scare me like that!” I yelled at her, pretending that I wasn’t really scared, but my voice was trembling. In my mind’s eye, my entire body was covered in goosebumps.

“Ah, I’m beat. Actually, I’m thirsty. Time for water!”

“Wait! I’m not done talking to you!”

Also, don’t walk around the halls when you’re dripping wet, I said, chasing after Karen as she headed to the living room, presumably to rehydrate.

Following her into the kitchen, I found her sticking her ponytailed head into the sink and gulping down water straight from the faucet.

How manly… Was she already a man among men?

Despite being my little sister.

“Glurp, glurp, glurp, glurp, phew!”

Having swallowed what looked to me like a gallon of water, Karen finally took her mouth off of the faucet.

“All right, Koyomi. My maidenly feelings are in tatters because you said I reek of sweat, so I guess I’m taking a shower.”

With that, she started to take off her tracksuit.

On the spot.

In other words, right in front of me.

Nothing about her behavior hinted at a maidenly anything that could be put in tatters… Maybe she wasn’t concerned because we were siblings, but normally, a kitchen wasn’t a place where you disrobed.

“……”

Still, you know what?

Like Tsukihi, she had a boyfriend.

Mizudori, I think his name was?

Not that I cared.

So whether or not she had any maidenly feelings, she was familiar with romantic ones, at least.

“Hey, Karen.”

I spoke up figuring I had nothing to lose. Maybe I’d get really lucky and be treated to a decent reply.

“What is it, Koyomi?”

“I want you to help me with something.”

“Oh. You’re finally interested in starting down the path toward karate mastery?”

“No, I didn’t mean any sort of secret technique.” Trying to sound serious, I put my question to her: “How do you decide whether you’re in love, whether you like someone?”

“Hunh? What, romantic advice?”

Now nude from the waist up, Karen draped her track jacket, shirt, and sports bra over her shoulder like a towel.

She replied, “If you see someone and think, *I wanna have this guy’s kids,* I guess you’re in love with him?”

…It was a very manly answer, but unfortunately, I doubted it would be of any assistance to me.

I carelessly consumed around eighty pages or almost a quarter of this volume's thickness playing around with my little sisters, so things are going to get a lot more brisk from here. Araragi novices who came here straight from the anime may have dropped out already, but if you're still reading, I'd like to ask for your patience as we proceed. Don't give up, you can do it!

Having ripped off–I'm sorry, borrowed–three thousand yen in funds from my lovable little sister Tsukihi (I might someday lose my line of credit), and after receiving some pertinent advice from Karen (that I'd probably never make use of), I got on my mountain bike and began heading straight to the major bookstore that you could call the only one in our town.

It was to procure dirty magazines, of course.

I was impressed in a way by my own stoicism as I left home for a very plain, everyday task, not allowing myself to be ungracefully excited by the beginning of Golden Week. Wallowing in conceit, I pedaled as fast as I could–and as I did.

I saw Miss H.

No, I'm sorry.

I saw Hanekawa.

Miss HANEKAWA.

"……nkk!"

I didn't have any particular reason in mind for doing so, but my reflexes made me slam on my brakes. I tilted my vehicle diagonally

and dragged the tires (in a two-wheeled drift?) before coming to a stop.

“Whoa… Ohhh.”

I was shocked. What kind of timing was this?

Just after getting into a fierce debate with my little sister about Hanekawa, and just after learning the truth that my feelings for her weren’t ones of love but of sexual frustration, I’d come across none other than the woman as she was on a walk. What an amazing coincidence.

I wondered.

Was she headed to the library again? No, it was Golden Week, so the library might be closed.

Then maybe she was thinking about heading to the bookstore to buy some study guides or something–that would make it a nightmare if we happened to meet up.

I’d have to call off my plan.

My determination, and all the thoughts and emotions Tsukihi put into lending me her allowance, would lose their purpose. How could I let such feelings from my sister, more important to me than life itself, go to waste? It would be on the level of canceling a public works project like the construction of a dam, if not worse.

“…Hm? Oh, I’m safe.”

Upon closer inspection.

Hanekawa was heading away from the bookstore. She didn’t seem to notice me as she crossed the road at a steady pace.

It seemed the bookstore was not her destination.

Hm.

Then where could she be going?

“……”

Allow me to give you an explanation here about Hanekawa–about Tsubasa Hanekawa.

Tsubasa Hanekawa, the president of my class.

A class president among class presidents–a woman who was the personification of a model student.

Even her outward appearance, braided hair with glasses, bolstered her inner personality to a T. Despite the day being part of Golden Week, she was still wearing her school uniform, undoubtedly out of strict adherence to school regulations.

She was frighteningly smart and always got the best grades in our year–and was as casual as could be about it. She got the best score with ease on every test we were given, and everyone in our year knew her name.

And she had a good personality, fair and just and well respected, and I don’t know, she was a high school girl as awe-inspiring as Perfect Cell.

I personally think that the concept of perfection might have been thought up by some ancient mystic who predicted Hanekawa’s birth using psychic powers to model the idea after her.

She existed on a different dimension from washouts like me and was someone I’d never have anything to do with–but just last spring break, she and I started having something to do with each other.

More precisely.

She saved my life.

She was my savior.

You could say I was crushed body and soul by her kindness–which is why I became friends with her after that.

…She did seem to have me mistaken for some kind of delinquent (Washouts and delinquents are apparently the same to her. Her leap in logic is that if you're a washout, you're not trying your best) and was eager to reform me. At this point in time, she'd gone so far as to appoint me class vice president. But let's take that in jest.

In the month since spring break, Hanekawa had been incredibly friendly to a regular, boring civilian like myself.

So much so–that I'd mistaken it for love.

"Heh. I think I should ignore her, though."

I hadn't been the most blessed with friendships ever since I started high school, and in that sense I'd become horrible at judging my distance to others. Still, I did know it was normal to say hello to a friend you saw on a day off.

That's what friends do.

It wasn't a serious act–but today, this day, was different. I had a mission. My sisters' thoughts and hopes were riding on my back (not that Karen had said anything), and I needed to spin these pedals to get to that bookstore.

Around and around.

Doing so would protect Hanekawa in the end–I realized when I was talking to Tsukihi that, putting aside all the chest stuff, if my misunderstandings led me all the way down the wrong path and I confessed my love (though I hadn't meant to), I'd put Hanekawa in an embarrassing spot.

No, she wouldn't be embarrassed. She'd probably lecture me and try to correct my misunderstanding.

The idea of telling a girl I love her only to get lectured in return was pretty depressing.

Though it also sounded fun in its own way.

Get ahold of yourself! she might scold me.

Even if you discounted that possibility, the manly thing was to grin and bear it and leave stoically, in spite of how much I wanted to say hello.

Farewell, Hanekawa.

Let's meet again in the classroom once Golden Week is over.

I would become a bigger person that moment–and hey, don't fall in love with the adult me, okay?

Right when I tried to start pedaling.

My legs froze once again.

Not just my legs–my whole body.

"…Huh?"

All of a sudden, Tsubasa Hanekawa turned the corner and changed direction–and I went from seeing her only in profile to facing her head-on.

Front and center.

And–I noticed the thick gauze covering the left side of her face.

I was at a loss for words.

It was the kind of thing that would leave anyone speechless–a visibly painful mark of treatment.

I couldn't see the left half of her face at all.

It was obvious that this was no treatment for something like a little scratch or a bruise from running into a wall–the white gauze,

held in place with medical tape, hid every inch of that side of her face.

It was more than visibly painful.

It simply hurt.

It hurt just to look at it–

Like the throbbing pain was being transmitted straight to me–

No.

If it was a plain injury, I would be running straight over to Hanekawa's side.

To express my concern.

To ask her what happened, how she'd gotten hurt that bad.

There would be lots of ways to pose the question. *Did you trip and fall? Did you run into a telephone pole?*

But–my whole body was paralyzed.

Because–no, maybe I was over-thinking it?

Could it have been my violent spring break driving me to brutal thoughts?

Like how most people were right-handed, and if they hit someone in the face, just the left side of the face would be injured, much like hers–

"……"

Hanekawa looked the exact same as ever, aside from the gauze–the braided hair, the glasses, even the uniform, it was all the same as ever, and that actually made it a heroic sight.

It was actually heroic.

Truly intense.

Then Hanekawa seemed to notice her classmate, frozen and unable to move. She noticed my existence.

I'd been found out.

Of course I had–it was one thing to be off to her side, but she was facing me now. I'd noticed Hanekawa, so of course she'd notice me.

I guess you could call this my first failure over Golden Week–my first mistake. If the plan had been to leave without saying anything, to pretend I hadn't seen her, I should have disappeared at once.

Someone like me?

I should have just disappeared.

But I froze like an idiot instead–which is why Hanekawa ended up recognizing me.

"Oh," she said.

Pointing at me.

"Howdy, Araragi."

She approached me with a friendly little jog.

"Yay, doing good?"

Her attitude, too–it was the exact same Hanekawa as always, which was why.

The gauze on the left side of her face stood out so much.

"…Howdy. Yay. Doing good…"

And so, when I replied that way, my voice didn't sound anything like normal. It was too high, and I might have managed to trip over the short words.

"Hm. Oh."

And then.

Hanekawa looked as though she'd failed at something.

My awkward, dejected reply that wouldn't even qualify as spoken in monotone must have made her realize–her current appearance.

This wasn't a speck of spinach between her teeth, of course. She had to be aware of the gauze on her own face.

So.

She had to have realized what caused my awful reaction–if I'd failed, so had Hanekawa.

She'd been in the same position–she shouldn't have called out to me even after noticing me.

That was the gist of it.

Hanekawa was perfect–but that didn't mean she never failed.

Well, maybe it wasn't a fail.

As far as she was concerned, maybe she was trying to forget about that painful injury–and thanks to her efforts, really, entirely, and perfectly forgotten about it.

In that case.

I was the one who–reminded her of it.

My inability to react well.

If anything.

"Ummmm."

It was rare to see Hanekawa searching for the right thing to say. Was she racking her brain to come up with some sort of solution to get her out of this tight spot? No, it felt like she was just at a loss.

But I could see.

I could see why she was at a loss for words–the awkwardness of being seen in her state was no longer *inconsequential.* She was worried that she was causing *me to be at a loss for words.*

She was thinking of how to deal with that and make me feel better.

Even in this situation.

She was thinking about me.

She was giving thought to others, not herself.

And because I couldn't help but see–I felt even more awful.

"Um, Araragi–"

"Hup."

Hanekawa had uttered my name, maybe so she could start explaining herself, or just start by breaking the silence, but then, as if to cut her off–I made my move.

I did, but not out of deep consideration–or to be even more honest, there wasn't any consideration behind it at all.

Not even the shallowest of thoughts.

What was there instead was an extremely personal desire: I couldn't bear to watch the pained and painful sight.

I didn't want to see that gauze on her face.

I didn't want to see her getting worried for my sake, either.

And so.

And so, imagining myself to be a submarine ace who'd take over the baseball world if he really existed, I scooped upward with my right hand–on a wild attempt to upturn Hanekawa's long skirt, which reached down below her knees.

In more common terms, I flipped her skirt.

“Hunhh?!”

In response to this bizarre behavior, Hanekawa slapped me across the cheek–behavior that was natural for a girl. A splendid show of snap judgment and instant execution, but calm reasoning would lead you to conclude that she shouldn’t have.

While I say I flipped her skirt, we were quite close to each other, about an arm’s length away (in other words, close enough for a slap to connect). Let’s say she hadn’t hit me. Then the impact wouldn’t have forced me to my knees, and I barely would have seen anything under her skirt, given the angle I stood at.

But Hanekawa held close to nothing back with her slap. It lacked anything you could call mercy, so I really was forced down on one knee–okay, I was actually laid out, made to crawl and lick the gravel. This ended up putting me at an angle almost directly under her, a location from where I was fortunate enough to witness everything there was to see under her flipped skirt–the skirt I’d flipped.

Maybe instead of saying I ended up at that angle, I ought to say I managed to assume it.

I bore holy witness.

It made me want to put my hands together.

In fact, I did as I bore witness.

Not on purpose, but as a natural reaction.

If it were a shrine, I would surely visit it a hundred times a day–no, it wasn’t an exaggeration to say that all my dreams had come true now that I’d been blessed with the sight.

What a miracle.

This is where I have to take back part of my conversation that morning with Tsukihi.

The underwear Hanekawa wore that day was so black it seemed like an all-encompassing darkness–as someone unfamiliar with clothing materials, I couldn't begin to imagine how it was possible to create something so dark.

It was that strikingly black.

It was beyond my imagination–and enough to disprove my speculation. That's how erotic it was.

And if I needed to make a retraction, so did Tsukihi–while all my efforts had done nothing to change her mind, if she were to see this sight, she'd surely understand that equating white with seriousness, purity, and chastity was a rigid and mistaken assumption.

White or black didn't matter.

If the same person wore both colors–it would be the same.

This dark black, this color in close contact with Hanekawa's body, was so serious, so pure, and so chaste–that it was dazzling.

It was possible for Eros to coexist with the serious, pure, and chaste, a color that did so existed.

Such a person existed, and Tsukihi and I needed to take these truths to heart.

Both brother and sister needed to repent.

During our conversation, I'd jumped from the topic of underwear to Miss H. in the first place due to all the occasions–two, three, four, maybe more–I had to see the vast and colorful array of underwear Hanekawa wore–but to think that her tastes reached all the way into the color black.

My goodness, Tsubasa Hanekawa–what a fearsome woman.

"…No, I'm quite sure you're the one who needs to be feared here."

While I lay there with barely a sign of getting up, thoughts racing through my mind like a revolving lantern hooked up to a turbocharged engine, Hanekawa had already regained her composure and was talking to me in the coldest of tones.

"You're out of middle school and still flipping girls' skirts… What are you thinking, Araragi?"

Come on!

She was mad at me.

This straightforward anger left me shocked and speechless.

There was only one answer to give if she wanted to know what I was thinking. I wasn't thinking anything.

What was I doing?

Flipping skirts?

Even elementary schoolers didn't do that these days.

"Um, Hanekawa?"

"I know."

Here, Hanekawa presented a hand. As in, *Grab onto this!*

I'd fallen flat, but it wasn't as if I'd been seriously injured. I should have been able to get up without a helping hand but couldn't refuse Hanekawa's offering.

I took her hand as though to shake it.

I stood.

"……"

I had to wonder.

My heartbeat quickened when I took her hand, when we held hands–but was it just another product of my sexual frustration?

I didn't know.

"You're so kind, Araragi," Hanekawa said.

Smiling.

Smiling with her face half hidden in gauze.

"You're such a good and kind person."

"……"

How do I put it?

Her smile–scared me.

I felt an honest fear.

Hanekawa was capable of smiling at me in this situation–showing me again that she was *different* from a washout like me.

Not different in the sense that anything was wrong.

It was closer to awe.

Yes, fear.

Speaking of which, wasn't Oshino more blunt about it? He'd even called Hanekawa "creepy," hadn't he?

"That's what I like about you, Araragi."

Unbelievable words spoken casually.

This was, of course, Hanekawa as usual–but why?

I felt happy to hear her say she liked me, but part of me also felt wounded.

Like she was gouging out my heart with a soft blade.

I felt so sad.

Really, why was that?

Then, Hanekawa continued, “Let’s walk. Just for a little.”

She invited me to join her and began walking, not waiting for my response.

Though I was confused, I didn’t hesitate–I kicked up the stand on the bike at my side, grabbed the handles, and began pushing it. I caught up to Hanekawa in no time.

From there, I walked beside her.

I’ve heard before that it’s good manners for the man to walk closer to the car lane when he’s with a woman. But here, that would force me to be on her left, so I found myself going on the other side.

Of course, I felt ready to offer my own body to protect her if a car came careening into the sidewalk–but Hanekawa probably didn’t want me to be to her left right then.

She didn’t want me to stand on the same side as that gauze.

That was my thinking.

“Hanekawa,” I began once we were side by side, deciding to start our conversation with a harmless question, “where were you heading?”

“Hm? Mmm, nowhere, really,” she answered. “I go walking on days off. I’m just strolling around with nothing to do.”

“You must at least have somewhere you’re heading, though.”

“No, I don’t. I don’t have plans to go anywhere.”

“……”

“It’s not like there’s anywhere I can go, anyway.”

“……”

“I can’t go anywhere,” Hanekawa said. Then she asked me in turn, “Araragi–you have little sisters, right?”

It didn’t seem like she was abruptly changing the subject.

“I think I remember you telling me that during spring break.”

“Ah…”

So I’d told her?

I was about to be amazed she remembered–but maybe there was no reason to be.

You could compare Hanekawa’s memory to a supercomputer’s. If she remembered every conversation we’d had, that wouldn’t be surprising.

Then again, I did remember every piece of underwear I’d ever seen on her!

“You’re not thinking about anything weird right now, are you?”

“Nope, not at all,” I denied before replying, “Yeah, I have little sisters.” Tentatively.

I did everything I could to probe and search my brain for a reason why she was on this topic.

“Two little sisters the world would never miss.”

“Never miss?” echoed Hanekawa with a teasing grin.

I mean it, I asserted a bit petulantly. I’d be upset if she thought I’d been bashful.

I’m neither tsundere nor reverse tsundere.

In fact, I’m anti-dere. I’d never act fawning, thank you very much.

“Sisters that annoying are one of a kind–or two of a kind. Do you have any idea how far off a nice, regular path those two have caused me to stray? How much they’ve ruined my life? I feel lost and

confused just thinking about it. I feel dizzy when I think about how normal of a life I could've led if only they weren't around."

"Well, listen to you. You say that, but I feel like you get along pretty well."

Hanekawa's grin wasn't going anywhere. If anything, it was only spreading.

"I bet you show off your underwear to each other."

"……"

How much dirt did she have on me?!

Well, it's not like we'd showed off our underwear…but it almost seemed like she knew everything about my interaction with Tsukihi that morning.

In that case, she might even know where I'd been biking to and why… It was a frightening thought.

What was she, the mind-reading monster *satori*?

Was I going to have to nickname her Satty?

"We absolutely don't," I answered in no uncertain terms with my manliest expression. Imagine a *Fist of the North Star* character. "All we ever do is fight. We haven't spoken in five years. And if they try to talk to me, I ignore them."

"You big liar."

"No, I'm telling the truth here. We only communicate using body language."

"Sounds like you get along fine."

"In fact, we haven't met in ten years. We only communicate by leaving each other notes. We call each other pen pals."

"Then you do get along fine."

Sure.

From an outsider's perspective, we did.

"Even today, though. Just today, this morning in fact, my littlest sister and I got in a fight. It was awful, she groped my hands with her chest."

"Groped your hands with her chest…"

"That's right! I'm never playing blackjack with her, she'd bust every one of my hands!"

Sadly, despite my indignant tone, Hanekawa didn't seem to sympathize.

Or rather.

Her eyes were wide with shock.

It was an honest reaction, too…

She'd lost any will to poke fun at me.

"Um," I tried to reboot our conversation, "while I say that, we are family. There's no hostility, but it's also true that they cause me all kinds of trouble–though I'm sure I've caused them at least a little bit of trouble as well."

"So it goes both ways. What's wrong with that? Sounds like family to me."

"Family?"

"Yep. Kin."

Hanekawa walked at a fixed pace as if she'd calculated everything out in advance. Matching her speed, I pushed my bike.

"Did I ever tell you I'm an only child?"

"No–I don't think you did."

But it did make sense now that she told me. Male or female, older or younger, I couldn't really see Hanekawa having any siblings.

"Which is why, Araragi–I don't have a family."

Hanekawa followed up with that line–like it was a normal thing to say.

It sounded so normal that I nearly didn't catch it.

I was on the verge of letting it go by with nothing more than a grunt of agreement.

She didn't have one? She didn't have a what?

"Whoa, Hanekawa, hold on–you can't say that you don't have a family just because you don't have any siblings. What about your dad, or your mom, or your grandpa, or your grandma–"

"I don't have one."

She didn't say it in a normal tone this time.

Hanekawa's words–were decisive and adamant.

Obstinate.

"I don't have a dad or a mom. I don't have anyone."

"……?"

As embarrassing as it is.

I didn't have any idea what she was talking about at this point. I couldn't even make a guess–it seemed like something I'd be able to figure out with a bit of thought, but.

It ran contrary to my image of Hanekawa.

The implications of what she'd said.

The way she'd said it.

"You need to cherish your family, Araragi."

“Hanekawa…you–”

“Oh, don’t get the wrong idea.”

That was a typical tsundere line, but Hanekawa of course meant it in the normal fashion.

“It’s not like I don’t have a single living relative or anything. You’re right, sorry. That was hyperbole. It wouldn’t be an overstatement to call it an exaggeration. I do have a dad and a mom. We live under the same roof. All three of us together.”

“Oh… You do? But in that case–”

“We’re just not a family, that’s all.”

That’s all.

As Hanekawa said this, her pace–stayed the same.

“My mom and dad aren’t my true mom and dad, that’s all.”

“‘True’…?”

“They’re false, I guess,” Hanekawa replied a little too simply.

Like she couldn’t do otherwise, even if she wanted to.

“Okay.” Her legs kept moving. “Where should I start–I guess seventeen years ago, with once upon a time there was a cute girl?”

“A girl?”

“Think of her as a seventeen-year-old, the same age as me.”

“Ah…” I nodded despite not understanding, and Hanekawa continued.

“One day, the girl found herself with child.”

She tossed out the words, when it would be a big deal.

“W-With child?”

“Yes. She became pregnant. She also didn’t know who the father was. She was a woman of many loves, you see–and she gave birth to me.”

“Wait…”

Perplexed, I wheeled around, bike and all, to block and stop her.

“Hold on. You’re moving too fast for me to follow–what? You?”

“Me.”

“……”

There wasn’t a thing different about Hanekawa.

She was acting completely normal–the same Tsubasa Hanekawa as always.

“It means I was born out of wedlock. That’s why. M-hm.”

“Wait–that doesn’t make sense. You don’t know who your dad is? But you just said you lived together with your mom and dad, didn’t you?”

“Oh, sorry. That dad’s a different dad. What I meant is that I don’t know who my biological father is.”

Strictly speaking, I wouldn’t say I have no clue, but what’s the point of looking into it. Hanekawa tilted her head, then circled around me and kept moving.

She didn’t have anywhere she was going.

But she kept moving.

“By the way, my current mom is also a different mom. The mom who gave birth to me committed suicide soon afterwards.”

“Suicide?”

“Suicide. She put a rope around her neck and hanged herself. A common enough form of suicide–though the one novel part about it was the location. Right above the crib.”

She looked like a mobile.

Hanekawa said it like it meant nothing.

As if she were explaining the plot of a TV drama she’d watched years ago, she recounted her life.

Her memories from a time she’d have no memory of.

“But she got married right before she killed herself. It was financially difficult to raise a child when she didn’t have a single relative she could rely on–it was for the money.”

“For the money…”

“I think loveless marriages are understandable in certain situations, but I don’t know about this one. What a tragedy it must have been for the man. A tragedy, or maybe a hassle. He had to take in a child she had with god-knows-who. Oh, and the man was my first dad.”

“First dad?”

“Also different from my current dad.”

“……”

Different dad, huh?

Different dad–but I wondered, different to what extent?

“I honestly don’t know what caused my mom’s suicide. It sounds like she was always emotionally fragile and sensitive, but she might have been a little too romantic to be able to weather a marriage of convenience.”

Still, I think the victim there was my first dad, Hanekawa stated her opinion.

That cool tone of voice.

That cold tone of voice, which wasn't like her.

My mind grew more agitated with every word she spoke.

"I barely remember this guy I'm calling my first dad, but he was a textbook workaholic, serious and single-minded–not someone who could raise a child, apparently. And so, another marriage. I guess you could say this one was 'for the childrearing.' Why not just hire a babysitter, though?"

I bet he thought not having a mother would be bad for my upbringing, being a serious guy, Hanekawa rationalized the actions of her so-called first dad.

"And that dad ended up working so hard it killed him. The mom he left behind, my second mom, is also my current mom, and my current dad is the man she remarried."

That's it, Hanekawa wrapped up with a smile.

So innocuously that if she'd followed up with, "Just kidding, that's all a lie. When I go home I'll have a warm bowl of soup, a kind dad, and a scatterbrained mom waiting for me," I'd have believed her on the spot.

In fact.

It sounded so much like a lie–the whole story was absurd.

You could even say it didn't make sense.

It wasn't particularly complicated. It was a pretty comprehensible family tree if you drew it out.

But.

If it was true, then the people Hanekawa lived with–the mom and dad she lived with who weren't family…

"Yup, if you want the gory details, I'm completely unrelated to the mom and dad I live with. Heh, calling the fact I'm not related by blood to someone 'gory' would sound like a funny joke to a vampire."

"…It wouldn't."

That was coming from me–so I was sure.

I doubted the little girl who was probably sitting with her arms around her legs in those abandoned ruins would crack a smile, either.

Not that I'd seen her smile in general since spring break.

"So what does that even mean?" I asked.

"It means I'm as orphaned as Hutch the Honeybee. Don't get me wrong, we went through the whole process and they're my father and mother on paper. My mom and dad. But they've never done a thing you could call motherly or fatherly."

All while I'm trying so hard to be daughterly.

I might have misheard that last bit, which sounded tacked on.

I couldn't believe Hanekawa, of all people, would gripe in such a self-regarding way.

But what did I know?

Maybe I didn't mishear her. Maybe I misunderstood her.

What did I know about Hanekawa?

Did I think that someone like her–would never feel worried or troubled?

Tsubasa Hanekawa.

Did I think she was free of wounds?

That she, at least, was free of remorse and regret?

That she never hated or disliked anything?

Did I think it was a given–that she would always be happy?

How pushy was I?

She continued, “I used to believe it, too–that you can still be family even if you’re not related by blood. I used to think I’d do my best to get along with the family I’d ended up in after being tossed from one person to the next. But it just doesn’t work.”

It doesn’t work.

And it’s so tedious.

As soon as Hanekawa said that, she whipped around. This time she was the one stepping ahead of me and blocking the way.

“Sorry, Araragi. That was mean of me, wasn’t it.”

“Why? What are you talking about?”

I was confused, unable to figure out why she’d want to apologize to me.

Meanwhile she went on.

“Well, I’m just venting at you. What are you supposed to say in this situation, right? You’d wonder, ‘Okay, so what,’ it’s not like it has anything to do with you in the first place–but then you start to feel a little pity for me until you feel guilty for pitying me when it didn’t make sense to, right? You…felt bad just now, like you did something

wrong, didn't you? Don't you feel depressed now, like you just peeked into a friend's private affairs?"

She spoke quickly, and I could sense the remorse gushing from her.

Her face suddenly took on a timid expression, as if one wrong move might cause it to crumble past the point of no return–and I found myself unable to object to her.

Was the gauze on her face augmenting that mood?

"That's why I told you," Hanekawa said. "That was my aim. I used you to cheer me up."

"……"

"I tried to feel better about myself by making you feel bad–I can't even call it griping." Hanekawa sounded so apologetic that I couldn't bear to look at her. "I'm just trying to relieve my frustration."

"Your–frustration."

To be honest.

By now–I had a pretty good idea.

I was sure that my apprehensions were correct–and of what being correct meant.

The gauze covering Hanekawa's face.

The reason for it.

Because *if the reason I had in mind wasn't it*–then Hanekawa wouldn't have gone into her personal history so suddenly.

Why else would she have vented herself?

Why else would she need to use me?

“Still–I’m surprised you know all that,” I said. “Don’t they usually not tell kids about that kind of thing? Like, they’ll keep it a secret until your twentieth birthday or something.”

“Well, I had some very open parents. I knew about it from before I started elementary school–I really do feel like I’m in their way.”

“…Hanekawa.”

I made up my mind–and began to ask.

I couldn’t let this slide.

Avoiding a clear answer, not checking my solution against hers, might have been the best course of action, but–

It was already too late.

I was already too deep into Hanekawa’s tale.

Her heart.

Her–family.

I barged in.

“*Your face–who did that to you?*”

I didn’t have any proof.

If I calmed down and gave it a bit of thought–actually, it wouldn’t take much at all–I could come up with lots of other reasons for her face to be injured. What an awful assumption to make that someone had done that to her.

Yet.

“Why would you ask me that?” she demanded. She wasn’t even rejecting my question. She sounded like a confused child blurting out what was on her mind. “Why would you, Araragi, ask that?”

“…Well.”

I hesitated.

This must have been Hanekawa giving me a chance. No–“chance” makes it sound too positive.

If you want to pull back, do it now.

It could have been a letter of warning–Hanekawa presenting me with an ultimatum.

Or maybe firing a shot across the bow.

Yet–I didn’t pull back.

“Must be because I’m your friend.”

“…Friend.”

“Isn’t that what friends do? Ask each other about stuff? In situations like these? Not like I’d really know.”

Hanekawa had been my first friend in a while.

And that was why–I couldn’t judge our distance.

I couldn’t tell where she was, almost like in a 3D movie–there was some parallax.

“Hmm, okay. Yeah. You might be right,” Hanekawa nodded in reply. Rather than press me any further, she nodded. “You are right. Stopping here would mean I actually am just venting at you–and I guess that would be too much to call payback for flipping my skirt.”

“……”

No, it was easily enough.

In fact, I felt like I wanted to show her my boxers as change.

But I wasn’t saying that.

“Promise you won’t tell anyone?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Anyone. I mean it, not a person. Not your sisters–not your family. It’s a secret.”

All her emphasis seemed half-playful–but you could also take it as deadly serious.

If I were to take the shrewd view, she was making me go on the record.

That was the kind of tone she used.

And though I felt intimidated by it–I nodded.

“I…promise.”

“My dad hit me this morning.”

Her reply came at almost the exact moment I gave my consent.

She wore a quick, easy smile.

A grin.

The way she said it, it sounded almost normal, like it happened all the time in any family.

“That’s…”

My voice–was shaking.

With rage. With fear.

“*That’s not all right!*”

Of course.

This was the conversation’s natural conclusion given the way it had been going. Not something to be surprised about. If I had been wrong, it couldn’t have been by much–maybe it wasn’t her father who hit her but her mother, or she wasn’t punched but hit with an object.

“He’s never done a thing you could call fatherly for me–but I never imagined he’d do something you could call unfatherly to me. Whatta surprise.”

“‘Whatta surprise’?” There was no hiding my bewilderment. “I thought you said–you didn’t have a relationship with anyone in your family?”

“We’re not a family. But no, I don’t,” Hanekawa said, now in a truly cold tone. “Maybe too much so–maybe I’d become a stranger. Or maybe I thought I could start one. Despite everything having balanced itself out. I guess that puts me in the wrong.”

“No–why would you be in the wrong? How could it possibly be your fault?”

After all.

You’re–always right.

“Why would your dad hit you in the first place?”

“It was nothing, really. I made a remark about some work he brought home, and then he hit me. My mom watched and didn’t say anything. That’s all.”

“What do you mean, ‘that’s all’?”

I bet–it was nothing, really.

Indeed, that must have been all.

So simple it was superfluous to say: *That’s all.*

Yet.

“Why would a father hit his daughter–over nothing?”

“I mean, just think about it, Araragi. If you were about forty–and some seventeen-year-old complete stranger starts mouthing off to

you like she knows it all? You wouldn't blame yourself if you got a little upset, if you lost your temper, don't you think?"

"__"

A *seventeen-year-old complete stranger*?

Why would she–degrade herself like that?

It was actually scarier to hear that than learning she'd been hit.

No, wait–it wasn't fear.

I figured out why my body was shaking.

I figured out why my mind was so agitated.

I felt–creeped out.

Not even to borrow from Oshino.

It was what I felt in my heart–my own words, my own feelings.

Tsubasa Hanekawa creeped me out.

She didn't call them family, they were her false mom and dad, complete strangers–even so, Tsubasa Hanekawa was *trying to cover for her parents.*

From whom, I didn't know. From me? From society?

In any case.

She was trying to cover for them.

These parents who weren't her parents.

These parents who would hit their daughter.

And being her friend–her behavior just creeped me out.

What was with her?

What was going on?

“You’re saying you can’t blame someone for getting violent? Are you sure you should be saying that? Isn’t it the most unforgivable thing you–”

“Wh-Why not? It was just once.”

That’s what she said.

No.

I made her say it.

“Well, didn’t I just hit you?” she asked. “Are you mad at me for it?”

“No–that was…”

That was my fault.

While mine may have qualified as a just cause, you can’t blame a girl for hitting a boy flipping his classmate’s skirt.

“Right? You can’t blame anyone.”

A guileless grin stretched across Hanekawa’s face, as if she’d spoken not out of false courage or as an attempt to garner sympathy, but because she believed it from the bottom of her heart.

“*You can’t blame anyone for hitting me–because I’m me.*”

“……”

I’d say I was at a loss for words–but I wasn’t.

There were no words for me to be at a loss for.

There was nothing for me to say to Hanekawa as she was now.

Who knows how she took my speechless reaction?

“You promised, Araragi, right?” she checked to make sure.

Taking a step toward me.

Like she was getting me in the fold.

“You promised, Araragi. You won’t tell anyone–you promised, okay?”

Anyone.

Neither my sisters nor my family.

And–neither the school nor the police.

No.

That wasn’t it. That wasn’t all.

She was telling me I’d promised never to bring the subject up again–*more than anyone, not to Hanekawa, herself.*

That’s what she was saying.

What she was doing was trying to tie my hands by telling me every last detail.

She’d made me mark my own words and was using that to trip me up–for her parents’ sake.

For the father who hit her.

For the mother who just watched.

To protect–complete strangers.

“B-But–how am I supposed to promise something like–”

“…Please, Araragi.”

That was what she said to me as I wavered and minced words.

Faced with an insincere person who was getting ready to break a promise without a second thought, the ever-sincere Tsubasa Hanekawa–bowed her head.

Deeply.

I was worried her back might snap, so deeply, as though into some kind of void, sank her braided head.

“Don’t tell anyone about this, please.”

“Hanekawa… But…”

I still showed signs of resistance, but she mechanically repeated the same line, *Don’t tell anyone about this, please.*

“I’ll do anything if you stay quiet.”

“Wait, seriously?! You’ll do anything?! Awwright!”

I bit.

“A-Araragi?”

As I pumped both fists, jumped up and down, and screamed with joy, Hanekawa looked at me wide-eyed, making no attempt to hide her shock. She’d taken a step toward me earlier, but now she took a step back. No, two steps. Three steps? About that far.

Like her heart had grown more distant than that.

But I couldn’t care less at the moment.

Hanekawa would do anything for me?

Tsubasa Hanekawa?

And all I had to do was stay quiet?!

“Oh man, what should it be? What should I have her do, what should I have her do? What’s the best thing I could have her do? Wait, no, hold on, Araragi. Don’t get too worked up. Don’t get crazy, it’s times like this when you need to play it cool. Be dignified. This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance, you’ve got to make the most of it.”

“Wh-What? That’s how you’re going to react? Is that how this scene goes? I thought you were going to be impressed by how serious I am and reluctantly promise to keep your silence.”

“How serious you are? I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

Throw that to the cats!

I couldn’t bear to stand still for any longer and began to wander in aimless circles. Any passerby would immediately peg me as suspicious, but I didn’t care about how others saw me now. I didn’t care about Hanekawa’s scowl, either.

“Anything, huh? I don’t know how to reply to that, though. Damn, I hate how indecisive I am. It would be so manly if I could answer right on the spot.”

“No, I think that would make you the worst man ever…”

Hanekawa was plain grossed out by me.

It felt like she might run off at any moment.

“Hey, Araragi? Do you remember all that really serious stuff we were just talking about?”

“I don’t.”

“You don’t.”

“Who’s Araragi?”

“So you’ve even forgotten your own name…”

I didn’t expect this turn of events, Hanekawa lamented with her head in her hands. While I was happy she was this shocked at me forgetting my own name, who cared about me? I was just chopped liver.

The line she’d spoken was the only thing I needed to remember.

“That’s right. Her line just now, ‘Missus Hanekawa’s gonna do anything Araragi-kun begs for☆’…”

“I never said that!” she yelled.

She could be as mad as she wanted, but it wasn’t going to have an effect.

“And who’s Missus Hanekawa?”

“Hm? Oh, sorry. I was wondering what it’d be like if I had you act like a teacher, and it just slipped out of my mouth.”

“Why would you?!”

“Um, what exactly was it that you said?”

“Ngkk…”

An endless amount of distress was welling up in Hanekawa, but she was too sincere of a person to take it back and deny my request.

“…Don’t tell anyone about this, please.”

“No! The thing you said after that!”

What did she mean, *about this*?!

I’d never heard those words in my life!

I couldn’t believe how fresh they sounded to my ears!

“I’ll do anything if you stay quiet…”

“Sorry, I couldn’t hear you very well thanks to electromagnetic interference from space! Could you repeat the first half just one more time?”

“……”

By now, her scowl had turned into what you could call a withering glare.

Hmm.

I wanted her to say it with an embarrassed blush on her face, but I wasn't going to push my luck. Having her disdain me in her heart but still vow absolute obedience was nice in its own way, though.

…I may be imagining things, but is more than just Hanekawa looking at me with disdain here? In fact, am I feeling the looks from those of you sirs and madams who got into it through the anime as you flap this book shut?

That's fine.

I'm sure some great man of yore once said it's important to live your life in your own way, no matter what others think. Thank you, man of yore.

"I'll do anything," Hanekawa repeated.

Her tone couldn't be any flatter.

"……"

Not much could bother me now, but that tone did.

"Put, you know, a little more feeling into it, please," the guy who was seeking absolute obedience asked in an oddly modest manner.

"Think of that flat delivery as containing all of the feelings I harbor for you right now."

"Bosh. Believe in yourself, Hanekawa! I know you can put more soul into it."

"I. Will. Do. Any. Thing."

Her tone wasn't flat this time, it was so full of soul it shook. Furious, indignant soul.

It felt like she wasn't going to do anything for me.

Like she wouldn't even stick her tongue out at me.

“Gah… I’m not gonna lose.”

I wasn’t bending to this power.

She’d made a clear promise.

That meant I was free to do whatever I wanted.

It was time for me to take the stage.

It was time for Koyomi Araragi to shine.

“You’ll do anything, hmm? But really, what should I make you do? There are so many options that it’s hard to choose! I feel like I need to write a whole essay about this! My composition skills are being put to the test!”

If only I’d studied more!

Why had I missed the morning bell so often, when I attended a prep school?!

They say that excessive happiness can induce panic, and that’s exactly what happened to me. I was in danger of making an impossibly huge mistake if I didn’t calm down before acting.

“Hold on a second! I just realized, Hanekawa, that you didn’t put a limit on the number of requests! Doesn’t that mean you’ve agreed to grant an unlimited number of wishes?!”

“You get one!” she immediately corrected herself. “I’ll do any *one* thing!”

“Damn… I got you to clarify.”

Life wasn’t going to be that easy.

But fine.

I always liked Earth's Shenlon better than Planet Namek's. It's way handier when you can bring your dead friends back to life at once.

"You're honestly starting to give me a headache…" Hanekawa actually cradled her head. "It hurts more than where my dad hit me on the cheek."

"You have a headache?"

"Yeah. I've had one ever since I got mixed up with you during spring break."

"Hm."

That was quite concerning.

But we were going to put that aside for the moment.

"Why don't we head somewhere more abandoned, Hanekawa?"

"Um, I think there's already plenty of abandonment here already…"

"I'm talking about people, not feelings."

This way, I beckoned her.

"Ugh… Okay, fine. It's not like I have anywhere to go, anyway."

She let out a conspicuous sigh and followed after me.

Heh. She could try to sulk to make me feel guilty, but it wasn't working.

I had her entire being in the palm of my hand–I wasn't such an amateur that I was going to pass up this opportunity. This great challenge I now faced was going to be where I showed her just how much of a man I was.

Finding a safe-looking spot and parking my bike (I had to guard against theft since it was a pretty nice mountain bike), I brought Hanekawa to some nearby bushes.

"……"

I brought Hanekawa to some nearby bushes.

I brought Hanekawa to some nearby bushes.

I brought Hanekawa to some nearby bushes.

I don't know, the somehow criminal ring to those words…sent shivers down my spine!

No!

This was consensual! It wouldn't be a crime!

In fact, given the situation, it'd be more correct to say that Hanekawa was making me bring her to some nearby bushes!

Wasn't this a case of her being a bossy bottom?!

Or maybe a tsundere bottom!

…Fine, there's barely anything about Hanekawa you'd describe as tsundere. For some reason, though, it seemed that way with how cold she was being.

A limited-time-only tsundere.

"Okay. Now what, Araragi?"

She was the first to speak this time, almost as if she didn't care anymore.

She was leaning on the tree behind her, and something about her demeanor suggested that she was a nice older girl playing make-believe with a kindergartener.

Saying, *Yeah. Sure.*

“What’s going on, Hanekawa? You seem awfully composed.”

“I am,” she taunted, as calm and collected as can be. “I know what’s going to happen next. No matter what request you make, once I start following your every word, you’ll get scared and do nothing in the end.”

“Wh-What did you just say?!”

Get scared?!

I couldn’t believe this insult!

When have I ever been scared?!

“Spring break. In the P.E. shed.”

I received a pointed reply.

All I could do was fall silent.

I felt as silenced as a lamb.

That would make her a very cute serial killer, though.

Hanekawa Lecter?

“I remember it like yesterday, Araragi–you acting like the big chicken you were during spring break. Even someone who’d never seen a poultry bird could have taken one look at you and more or less figured out what sort of animal it is.”

The dripping sarcasm wasn’t the usual Hanekawa. She could remember it like it was yesterday but didn’t seem to want to reminisce about it for a second.

“So, Chicken Araragi. What should I do? I know I won’t have to do anything, but I’ll at least hear you out. Tell me. Do you want me to strip? Down to what?”

“……”

Hmm.

Hanekawa seemed to have an extremely low estimation of my manliness.

As a guy, I couldn't be any more humiliated–but then again, she seemed to have misunderstood something.

Yes, I was a chicken over spring break.

I admit that.

But she was dead wrong if she thought all chickens stayed chickens. Just as a baby chick will grow into a rooster in time, I, too–wait, I'd still be a chicken.

That wasn't it.

I may be a chicken, but I was a Nagoya cochin, the best money could buy!

I needed to take this on and make up for all the face I'd lost over spring break.

Heh.

The gods were merciful to give someone like me an opportunity to avenge myself.

……

Seriously, someone like me.

Shouldn't the gods be a little pickier?

"Hmm…"

I put my hand to my chin and began to ponder. I walked my eyes across Hanekawa's body from the tips of her toes to the crown of her head.

"Urk…"

Though Hanekawa seemed to flinch at my gaze, she stood firm, held her hands behind her back as if to stretch her spine, and actually gave me a better look at her body.

Gah.

Was this her acting brave?

Or did she really believe from the bottom of her heart that I was a chicken?

…Probably the latter.

Hmph, in that case, I'd just take advantage of the fact–there was no way the anime of a series like this would continue all the way to the seventh installment, so no matter what I did, not too many people would find out.

The scene wouldn't be fit for TV, but it shouldn't affect my favorability rating if it stayed print-only!

There's no regulatory agency for novels!

"What's gotten into you, Araragi? You're acting awfully pompous–or are you not able to come up with anything? Oh, or is that what you want to do? Ogle my whole body like you're licking me clean?"

"……"

Hm.

Oh–okay.

Hanekawa might have said that to provoke me, or maybe just to discourage me–but she'd actually given me a huge hint.

That was my opening.

Yes.

Hanekawa's wording, "I'll do anything," had drawn me down the path of thinking only about what I could get her to do–but the opposite approach was on the table, too.

I didn't need to get her to do something for me–I could also do something *to* her.

In terms of her offer, I'd be telling her to put up with something–yup.

This was a very real possibility.

And that wasn't the only hint her words contained–it wasn't like her to make such a foolish move.

She'd pretty much given me a guide on how to defeat her. Or was it her being a bossy bottom, after all? In that case, there was no need for me to hold back.

The last thin layer of my conscience had just been peeled away–wait, wasn't that terrifying?

My conscience?

If I didn't have a conscience…

"Hanekawa."

"Yes?"

"Ogling at your whole body like I'm licking you clean isn't what I want."

"Well, of course not…" Hanekawa tilted her head. "That's what you're always doing to me, anyway."

"She knew!!"

She knew my eyes were fixed on her (chest) during class and whenever else! I wanted to dig a hole and die in it!

“I think it’d be better if you looked at the blackboard, for your own good. Why let all the work our teachers are doing go to waste?”

“Ghukk…”

Saying it like she was giving me a mild warning!

It would’ve been easier if she’d started blasting me… My heart couldn’t take much more!

You can do it, me!

Stay strong!

Reinforce that wounded heart of yours!

If you can get through this, paradise awaits you…probably!

“And to give you one more piece of advice for your reference, girls are surprisingly sensitive to people’s gazes, so be careful when you look at them.”

“Damn you… As hell-bent on breaking my will as you seem to be, saying these things won’t work…”

My knees were giving out by this point, but I somehow pulled myself together and rose back up.

“Hanekawa. Ogling at your whole body like I’m licking you clean isn’t what I want.”

“Well, of course not.”

“I…” Looking right at Hanekawa, but this time straight into her eyes, I said, “I want to lick the wound under that gauze, where he hit you.”

004

Okay.

While I've brought up the topic enough times so far to give you little sniffs and nibbles of info, I think I should take the time here to talk about spring break in an easily digestible way.

As the person at fault for those two weeks, to be honest, I'm not very enthusiastic about the idea, but I've reached the unfortunate conclusion that I can't avoid it if I want to talk about Golden Week.

Spring break.

I was attacked by a vampire.

In this day and age of real, working maglev trains, when school trips to foreign countries are nothing unusual, it's embarrassing enough to make me want to go into hiding, but regardless, I was attacked by a vampire.

A vampire–the king of aberrations.

Freezes your blood, makes it boil.

An iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire.

An aberration slayer with a countless number of epithets.

A beautiful vampire with golden hair and eyes so bright they dazzled, so bright they blinded, chomped into my neck, sucked all the blood from my body–and *turned* me into a vampire.

Immortal. Unrivaled. The strongest of them all–a vampire.

And with neither vampire hunters, Christian special forces, nor kin-slaying vampires to save me–my spring break was consumed by a battle to become human again.

To spoil the whole thing for you, I was able to in the end with the help of a shabby geezer who was passing by and my class president.

How lucky.

How unlucky.

Though there were a few aftereffects.

I was able to turn back into something asymptotically close–to human.

And I lived happily ever after.

All's well that ends well.

Of course, nothing in this world or in a life ends that simply, not to mention that we don't get proper endings to begin with. But if I still had to pick an ending, I'd say that it had all ended for me the moment that beautiful demon bit me.

That aside.

Those "few aftereffects" I mentioned are why I needed to insert this story at this point. Vampiric aftereffects.

The most conspicuous is my ability to heal and recover–exactly like an immortal vampire in manga, anime, and other media they're so popular in today.

For example, I could fall and skin my knee, suffer a paper cut, or get hurt in a scuffle with my little sister Karen, and while it would of course depend on my condition at that moment, on *my degree of vampirism,* I could probably heal in no time from that minor of an injury.

It would heal.

It would be fixed.

Literally inhuman recuperation–and in some situations, the ability worked on *others.*

I'm able to heal other people's injuries.

Applying my blood, saliva, or whatever other fluid–*a coat of it*–could heal wounds. In other words, think of it like a decently strong Neosporin or Mentholatum.

Applying my saliva.

Licking someone–healed them.

And.

So.

That being the case.

"Thank you."

Hanekawa expressed her gratitude once we were done.

She'd figured out my plan from the beginning, though.

I was going to heal the wound under her gauze but be subtle about it–so subtle as to sacrifice my favorability rating and act like my only goal was to satisfy my desire–but it was all completely obvious to her.

Since she'd probably turn down any offer of treatment, I'd thought to use her words against her, but she easily caught on to my scheme.

Shameful.

I wanted to dig a hole and die in it.

Hanekawa, for her part, must have entrusted herself to me despite seeing through my plan not because she wanted her injury healed, but more to help me save face.

Hrmm.

It felt sad to know how rigged the thing was from the start.

“You’d better put that gauze back on for now,” I said as if to hide my embarrassment. No, hiding my embarrassment was exactly what I was doing. “It’d seem weird if your wound healed all of a sudden. You need to at least *pretend you’re hurt,* or else–”

“My parents will be suspicious?” Hanekawa finished my thought for me. “They won’t,” she continued. “That’s not who they are. I could cut my hair short and I doubt they’d notice. They probably–don’t even remember my face.”

As one more note here, as a chicken without the guts to actually lick Hanekawa’s face, I’d taken the wholesome route of pricking my finger with a safety pin on my bag and spreading that blood on the area in question.

I was a long ways off from spreading my wings as a Nagoya cochin.

Of course, I was now a mockery of a vampire, and while I don’t know how it would have gone over spring break, my current bodily fluids weren’t enough to provide Hanekawa with a full and radical cure–but examining the result, I thought at least it wouldn’t leave a scar.

Looking at it the other way around.

If I hadn’t treated her–

It was ugly enough that she’d have been left with a clear scar.

I had to wonder how hard you needed to hit someone for them to end up that way.

It was grotesque.

It was disgusting.

Her father had pummeled his own daughter's face–Hanekawa's wording had made it sound like he'd hit her once, impulsively, but it was hard to imagine that being the case.

He must have beaten her over and over, persistently–relentlessly.

That's what it looked like.

The "reason" Hanekawa had given for why she'd been hit was trivial no matter how you looked at it–however much she might have "mouthed off," it hardly seemed to justify a father beating his daughter, or for that matter, an adult male beating a girl.

And yet.

When I asked her, "Do you want me to walk you home?"

She replied, "No, I'm fine." A brisk–and unsparing refusal.

She really didn't seem to want others meddling in her business–of course she didn't.

It wasn't like she had asked me for help.

I'd just happened to meet her on the street.

It was simple coincidence.

No, even if she'd asked me for help, it wasn't like I could save her–because people.

People just go and get saved on their own–

Which is why.

Which is why we then walked together and carried on one of our silly conversations before casually, vaguely parting ways when it felt right. I want to say that at some point in between we buried a white

cat that had been hit by a car, but I don't really remember the details.

There you have it.

I had no choice but to make a major change in plans for the rest of my day–the dam construction was being canceled. I was in no mood to go to the bookstore. Getting on my bike as soon as we split up, I turned right around to go home.

"Oh. Koyomi? That was fast."

When I returned, Karen was doing a handstand and climbing up and down the stairs–what the heck was she up to? What kind of workout was that?

"……"

But I passed by her, not even in the mood to quip, and headed to the bathroom to wash my hands.

"Hey, what's your problem, Koyomi? Don't ignore your cute little sister, at least say hello on your way in. You finish shopping?"

"Shopping? Oh, well…"

I hadn't gone shopping.

Not only was my frustration unrelieved, I was even more pent up than before.

My feelings, my thoughts, only weighed heavier–

005

The next day.

April thirtieth, in other words.

Still, it felt more like the night of the twenty-ninth (it's not a new day to me until my little sisters wake me up)–and around the time my parents went to bed, as did Karen and Tsukihi, up late because it was a holiday, I snuck out of the house. Straddling my mountain bike, careful to make as little noise as possible, I stealthily inched its pedals forward. Even I had to admit that I was going overboard by not turning on my light for a while.

Out to have some fun at night?

No, that wasn't it.

I'm not brave or resourceful enough for that–while I may have the grades of a washout, I am, in spite of myself, a fairly serious high school boy.

It hurts me to be treated as a delinquent.

So, you ask, where was I fighting through my drowsiness to go to? Some ruins on the edge of town, an abandoned building they say was once a cram school. It was so close to crumbling that kids wouldn't even dare each other to enter it, a building that looked only like the remains of something–though I'm sure it wouldn't make a good impression on anyone that I was heading to such a place in the middle of the night.

You could call it an act of delinquency, and I'd have no room to argue.

But I did have a reason.

A reason for heading there, of all places–and in the middle of the night.

A firm reason.

I stopped my bike in front of the fence encircling the ruins, and while there was obviously no need to, considering the complete lack of any other human presence, I put my chain lock around the rear wheel. Just to be sure, but more likely out of sheer habit. I then entered onto the grounds through a hole in the fence and went inside the building.

I know I said that kids didn't dare each other to, but breaking into it at night, regardless of how at home I'd made myself there, sent a bit of a shiver down my spine–in particular.

Because there was a real ghost inside, in particular.

A ghost.

A yokai.

An aberration–the king of aberrations.

A vampire.

A nightwalker.

"Then again, I guess that's in the past–"

Once upon a time, in a land far, far away.

Yes.

It wasn't a vampire in here–but the vestiges of one.

A husk of a vampire–the dregs of a vampire.

Because she was a little girl who was a mockery of a vampire.

The building was in even worse shape inside than it looked on the outside, and, dodging rubble and trash the whole way, I used the stairs to head straight to its fourth and highest floor.

There were three rooms on the floor–all once used as classrooms–and I began turning their doorknobs with proximity as my only priority.

It seemed I had bad luck that day.

Both the first door and the second left me empty-handed.

Not that a prize was waiting for me behind the third–because while the little girl who was a mockery of a vampire was there, someone else, a man who should've been, wasn't.

"Huh… Dammit, Oshino. Where'd you go at this hour?"

Was he out?

His behavior was always opaque–but it was so late. Maybe he was dozing away on one of the lower floors with some old desks as his bed. Maybe he'd predicted my arrival and avoided the fourth-floor classrooms so his sleep wouldn't be disturbed. I hadn't given him the exact date and time of my visit, but he always acted like he saw straight through people–so maybe he'd seen me coming.

I admit, I was an unwelcome guest in that regard. No one with any sense would make a visit in the middle of the night. If anyone was in the wrong here, it was me for expecting him to be waiting with the usual *you're late, Araragi.*

Dealing with a vampire, which was hardly common sense, caused your own actions to start lacking common sense. That made perfect sense–but.

Closing the door behind me, I looked at the young girl, the former vampire, sitting in one corner of a pitch-black room–and gulped.

I was totally nervous.

Now that I thought about it.

This was my first time alone with her since spring break–with not another human present.

Oshino was around every other time I'd met her *here like this*–and while I said "not another human," she was certainly not human, and neither was I.

A half-assed aberration–and a half-assed human.

And the responsibility for the two of us being this way–fell mostly on my shoulders.

No wonder I felt nervous.

And tense.

And guilt–began to bloom.

To *moé.*

"……"

Just so we're clear, that's *moé* in the original sense of "sprout," and in no way was I taken by the cuteness of the lightly dressed blond girl.

Even if she was sitting there looking like a cherubic eight-year-old.

Even if she had voluminous yet delicate blond hair, each strand like a thread of fine silk.

Even if she wore an adorable dress–even if she had slender, bare feet so pale you could nearly see through them and that you'd never imagine walking around these ruins.

There was nothing cute about her.

I don’t need to expand on this point. It’s self-evident.

All you needed to see were her eyes as they glared daggers of resentment straight through me.

“Stop with those eyes. It’s such a waste of your beauty,” I joked as I approached her–carefully, one step at a time. “Come on, try giving me a smile. You look your best with a smile on your face.”

No reply.

It’s not like she was a plain old corpse–well, maybe she was like a corpse.

I hadn’t spoken expecting a reply, either. She’d uttered nary a word since the end of spring break. Even I wasn’t so self-centered to think she’d pipe up now all of a sudden, at this point in time.

Just.

If I let myself fall silent too–my heart might break. Prattling on, at least for my part, was all I could do.

Especially with Oshino out today.

But–all of that aside, it was the honest truth that I thought she looked her best when she smiled.

As she sat in the classroom corner with her arms wrapped around her legs, ready to be assimilated into the mold on the walls, I plopped down on the floor in front of her and undid my shirt.

…Another clarification. While I suddenly did start stripping in face of a lightly layered blond girl, I wasn’t planning on launching into my best Lupin III impression or anything.

Novel or not, you couldn’t publish that.

Not everyone would accept the excuse that she’s technically not a little girl but an aberration and in fact five hundred years old.

The reason I was topless in these ruins regardless of it being the end of April, when it was still cold out–was to feed her.

Feed her?

What does taking off my clothes have to do with that?

Was I going to serve her sushi on a nude body, on my male form?

I can already hear you asking these questions, but I shouldn't have to explain (actually, anyone who wondered that last question has some pressing issues).

It goes without saying.

A bloodsucker feeds–by sucking blood.

"You could at least say grace, you know. The feeding itself is going to be a breach of etiquette whatever we do."

I put my arms around her small physique and lifted her bodily to guide her mouth to my neck–it was like we were embracing, a position that I just couldn't get used to.

Food. Blood sucking.

Then again, she wouldn't call this a meal. Maybe it was straightforward intravenous nourishment–because at this point in time, she'd even lost her natural ability to suck blood.

Mèmè Oshino, an authority on aberrations, had modified her constitution to accept only my blood–the flip side was that if she didn't ingest my blood regularly, she'd die in no time, vanish in no time. She was that fragile of a being now.

As far as her soul goes, Araragi, she's almost your slave, Oshino had told me.

But no, being the one who continues to give her blood, I think it's me who's the slave.

I'm the one in her service.

My servant.

She used to call me that haughtily, arrogantly–recalling those times and seeing her feeble state made my chest ache.

Every time she sucked my blood.

Not my neck, punctured by incisors that bore just a faint hint of her vampiric legacy–but my chest.

My heart hurt.

Throbbed with pain.

Heartthrob.

But each time, precisely for the same reason–the pain brought me relief.

Because if she was consuming my blood–then she was trying to stay alive, at least.

This vampire, who once even attempted suicide.

This vampire, dead from the start.

She was trying to live, and *for my sake*–

"Hm?"

Even as I say that.

I realized she wasn't biting my neck, not today. We were in an embrace–she was putting all of her weight on me and wrapping not just her thin arms but her sticks for legs around my body, so that our torsos were glued like we were koalas or something–and yet she wasn't biting.

"…?"

I couldn't figure out what she was up to.

Was she refusing my blood and giving up on living after all? I shuddered at the possibility and held her close without thinking, nearly breaking her back–but that wasn't it.

I was wrong.

When I looked at her–when I followed the vampire-girl's gaze.

It wasn't my neck she was staring at.

Rather, it was at a package I'd placed on the side in order to hold her.

A package that emitted a sweet scent.

"Umm…"

It was a gift I'd brought for this abandoned building's resident free spirit, Mèmè Oshino, a vagabond whose life was anything but abundant, really just some refreshments.

It was an assortment from Mister Donut.

Ten I'd bought at the store for a thousand yen.

A golden chocolate, a French cruller, an angel French, a strawberry whipped French, a honey churro, a coconut cruller, a Pon de Ring, a D-pop, a double chocolate, and a coconut chocolate.

Of course it smelled sweet.

I'd originally bought them as a present for my sisters on the way back from meeting Hanekawa.

Both Karen and Tsukihi, however, had spouted nonsense about being on a diet and let their big brother's kindness go to waste.

I'd responded that growing girls shouldn't be going on diets and needed to get nice and fluffy, which led to an argument so fierce it may have permanently damaged our relationship. Since I'd bought

the assortment with money I'd borrowed from Tsukihi in the first place, I never had much of a chance.

It ended with me being forced to apologize.

What an outrageous sibling dynamic.

Still, ten was too many donuts for one person to eat alone, not to mention that donuts are notoriously quick to go stale, which is why I had no choice but to bring them to Oshino, who I assumed was not just in dire need of his daily bread but yesterday's as well.

He was just barely staving off the elements by living in this abandoned building, or rather, he might have been sustaining himself off the elements. Even I had enough compassion in me to want to treat him to something sweet for a change.

……

Of course, it's not lost on me that preening about a simple thousand-yen donut set is odd when I still owed a large debt, five million yen to be exact, to the man over what happened during spring break.

Five million.

That's the kind of money that adults hang themselves over.

I didn't have the first idea about how to pay him back and didn't even feel like thinking about it.

Was I supposed to sell my organs or something?

Using my immortality to produce whole new batches of them?

"Scary shit."

So.

That aside–the girl vampire in my embrace ignored me entirely to give her undivided attention to the fragrant assortment of donuts that owed its presence to the aforementioned chain of events.

There was fire in her eyes.

Passion in the way she looked at them.

“Hold on… No way.”

There was no way.

How could that be the case?

She may have been a husk, yes. She may have been dregs, yes.

While most of her nature had been stolen from her–though she’d been stripped of her figure, her form, and even her name, she was still a proud vampire.

No plain vampire, either.

An iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire, one of noble blood.

A thoroughbred among vampires.

Her?

How could she have blood, her staple food, right under her nose and still be more interested in donuts, of all things…

Shlurp.

I heard a sound.

I looked at her and saw drool coming from her mouth.

“You’re ruining people’s dreams!”

Yelling, I tossed her away.

The little girl flew into the wall behind her, hit her head, and lay still.

Oh no. I hadn't meant for my react to be so violent. The disgusting feeling of her drool dripping straight onto my exposed shoulder was partly to blame.

But that wouldn't cast me in the best light, either, when I'd schemed and failed to slather my saliva all over not just any patch of skin but Hanekawa's face.

"A-Are you okay?"

It seemed like she'd taken a hard hit, and as she rubbed her head, I offered a hand but she swatted it away.

She seemed to be upset.

Her blond hair was standing a bit on end.

…Like she was an animal or something.

Like an unsociable cat who wouldn't let you touch her.

I couldn't have her mad at me–her body wouldn't go for much longer unless she refueled, with blood. I hadn't been able to come to this abandoned building for a while because of how agitated I'd been. You could say that the root of the problem was that I'd mistaken my agitation for infatuation, but that was all cleared up now thanks to Tsukihi. I wanted to give my blood tonight to make up for wasted time.

It wasn't easy to sneak out at night under my sisters' watch–but since vampires are nocturnal and daylight hours are usually sleepy-time, the deed wasn't any easier while the sun was up.

No creature likes to be roused, so dispensing these meals could be a hassle.

In the end, there was no better time for drinking blood than the middle of the night.

…It really was like dealing with an animal.

Or a baby.

Was this how nursing mothers felt?

Okay, now what–I thought with arms crossed.

I would ask Oshino, if he was there, but he wasn't. And this wasn't so big that I'd wake him up over it if he was just sleeping in another classroom. He might go so far as to ask for an advisory fee and demand to be paid. I wasn't taking on any more debt.

And anyway.

I'd decided to be responsible for this vampire for the rest of my life.

What was I going to do if I couldn't resolve something this minor on my own?

"Am I just supposed to pat her on the head? No, that was a sign of submission…"

Hmm.

Oh, right.

This had all started over Mister Donut, so as simple as it seemed, maybe I needed to resolve this through Mister Donut too.

Right, food solved all disputes.

Like in *Oishinbo.*

Hahaha, how can I stay mad at you after what you've shown me with this food, or something.

Removing the box from the plastic takeaway bag, I placed it on my lap and opened it slowly so that the girl vampire could see.

I then grabbed one donut, a golden chocolate at the edge, and offered it to her with an outstretched arm.

I offered it.

As soon as I did, she took it from me.

With such incredible speed that it made me wonder if she hadn't lost one bit of her vampire skills, she took it.

Then, without taking a moment to inspect it, she munched on it.

This too was done at an incredible speed, and the golden chocolate disappeared in about three bites. The way she ate, I was afraid she'd gobble down her own fingers in the process.

Wait, wait, wait!

How badly did she crave these things?

It bears repeating that she never seemed to relish even my blood this much–I felt a bit hurt.

"–Whoa, hey!"

As soon as she'd finished, the girl vampire aimed straight for the other nine donuts that sat exposed on my lap.

I just barely managed, box and all, to evade her.

The way she pounced at me, I'm not kidding when I say that my abdomen might have ended up with a hole in it as collateral damage.

As she prepared for her next attack, I couldn't help yelling at her.

"Sit!"

I yelled at her, but "Sit"?

She wasn't a dog.

But the vampire faithfully did as she was told and sat in place–not slumped over with her arms wrapped around her legs in her usual manner, but with training-perfect posture, crouched with her hips half off the ground.

She stared at me with sharp eyes and a serious expression.

"……"

Though I didn't understand what was going on, I thought that I still needed to do something to break this stalemate. As a test, I took the French cruller, my personal recommendation out of the nine remaining donuts, and made a gentle offering to her.

I was afraid that handing it to her directly might cause my hand to be eaten off my arm after what had just happened with the golden chocolate, so it was more like I placed it in front of the sitting vampire.

It goes without saying that the floor of a ruined cram school is by no means a clean surface (though the vampire went barefoot, Oshino and I walked around in shoes), so I also made sure to place the donut on top of one of the paper napkins found inside the box.

I thought she'd leap right at it, but the girl vampire only drooled and maintained her stance.

Though she did glare at me with literally demonic eyes.

The way she stared up into mine made the way she'd looked at me earlier feel like a smile.

If looks could kill, I'd already be dead.

Then again, I've heard that certain lineages of vampires really can kill people with a single gaze.

Evil eyes, or demon eyes, or something.

Come to think of it, over spring break, didn't she simply glare at a concrete wall to smash it? Was my life in danger?

"…Shake hands."

I figured I'd try.

I held out my hand.

The vampire put her palm straight onto mine. It felt like a scene out of *E.T.,* but she did it with all the force of a slugger's high five, perhaps as a small act of retaliation.

"Um, okay… You can ea–"

In the game of *hyakunin isshu,* the players listen to a poem being recited, then race to be the first to take the corresponding card out of the many laid out.

The *kimari-ji* is the syllable that makes it clear which poem is being read. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that good hearing, which lets you move the moment the key bit is pronounced, separates the game's winners from its losers–I'm sad to report that I don't know very much about the game, but if the above is true, I'd have to admit that the vampire before me had what it took to be a very good player.

She'd moved before I was done saying "eat"–no, she'd finished moving.

She was sinking her fangs into the French cruller like she was some sort of wild beast.

Well, maybe not a wild beast.

She looked just like a pet dog.

The sight of an eight-or-so-year-old blond child stuffing her cheeks with a French cruller along with the napkin, on all fours as if she were licking the floor, teetered on many edges.

Along with the napkin… It felt like I'd made the right choice not handing it to her after all.

That said, even she seemed unable to digest a paper napkin, and the girl vampire dexterously separated it from the rest inside her mouth and spit it back out.

You couldn't call it the best show of manners.

Then again, you couldn't call it the best show of manners from the moment she was eating a donut while on all fours.

Well–during spring break too, she never had great manners when she ate. When I think back to what she told me then, it seemed like vampires and humans had different ideas of dining etiquette in the first place.

What was it she told me back then? That it's bad manners to stare at someone while they're eating? But the powerful glare she now sent my way had nothing to do with any broken rules of etiquette. It could only mean that she was aiming for the eight remaining donuts.

"Wait, but I brought these for Oshino–"

To begin with, no matter how much she enjoyed the donuts, they wouldn't serve as nutrition for a vampire. Because nutrition for this girl–the only healthy, balanced meal for her–was my blood.

"–But I guess you could have three more."

I'd brought ten.

Splitting them between her and Oshino came out to five each–and when I thought about it, Oshino would have just as hard a time as me eating ten donuts on his own.

"Okay, which do you want? Pick three."

I showed the girl the inside of the box.

"You only need to point."

Then, with a finger on her left hand–she started at the edge and pointed at every single donut, one by one.

Each one, from edge to edge.

"……"

All of them?

So greedy.

The vampire seemed unwilling to compromise, and once again, with the same sour look, she pointed with care from edge to edge at every single one.

She was so meticulous that she made sure to point at each of the D-pop sestet.

"Hmm."

So she had a sweet tooth… But still, all of them? How could her little body absorb all that sweetness?

The girl vampire stared intently at me as I wavered–I could feel the pressure coming from her. The same kind of pressure that broke concrete walls.

Seriously, I felt like I was about to be crushed.

Of course–it could have been my guilt that felt so crushing. It was my fault that she was forced to live this kind of life, at the end of the day. It hurt my heart to face the fact that a once proud, noble, and beautiful vampire was crawling around on the floor to eat donuts.

She who hadn't spoken a word to me since spring break.

Despite all the laughing she used to do, her face was now a dour, depressed mask.

Considering all she did, all she had done, natural feelings of pity–the natural pity any human should feel weren't deserved. I knew that, but.

"Okay, fine. You can have all of them," I said.

Generously and genially, I placed the entire box on the floor.

Almost like it was an offering.

“So spin around three times and say woof.”

Oops.

Man, I got caught up in the moment and asked her to perform a trick–but even as I thought so, and before I could take back my command, she spun like a top and landed a clean triple axel.

More like a dog than a top.

That she didn’t bark at the end, instead turning her head to the side with an upset look, might have been her last shred of pride as an ex-noble–but yeah, it was kind of late in the day for her pride to be showing.

Hmph.

It still looked like she wasn’t going to talk.

I thought she might get carried away and blurt out something, but I was being too optimistic.

Though even I’d feel let down if she’d chosen this comedic scene to speak at long last.

What kind of person would come up with a story-ruining twist like that?

I slid the box of donuts over and told her to eat. Then, like she’d been waiting, the vampire got back on all fours and began cramming all the donuts in her mouth, jumbling them together, box and all.

Her appetite was making her forget herself, and I worried that she might start eating the floor.

She was more malnourished child than dog.

“For reals? These halo-shaped treats are so delish. ’Tis nothing short of a chest of gemstones holding the sweetest of rings.”

“Did you just talk?!”

I’d happened to look to the side but snapped my head back toward her in surprise. But the vampire, her expression as close to blank as an expression could be, casually went on devouring the floor–I mean, the donuts.

Ah, I was just hearing things…

Yikes, it made my heart skip a beat.

I thought all the drama had been ruined.

Really, what a nasty and unfair surprise.

“Hmm…well, I guess knowing her favorite food is…at least something.”

Learning that she had a food she liked so much it made me hear things was an important piece of info for maintaining my relationship with her going forward.

But.

Even then–she wouldn’t talk to me.

I wished she would so much it was making me hear things–but she stubbornly refused to speak to me.

Even though we were once master and servant, temporary as that may have been.

“Phew. It’s not like you can’t speak properly because your throat and tongue are an eight-year-old’s–”

Actually, I’d never thought of that before, but maybe that was it.

But even if it was, I wished she’d talk, if only in broken sentences.

Like Sue from *Genshiken.*

Like Sue from *Genshiken.*

Like Sue from *Genshiken*!

“What’re you doing, Wet’n’soggy?”

And then.

I leapt to my feet at the sudden voice behind me like I’d been doused with a bucket of cold water.

I turned around to find Oshino there.

I’d heard no footsteps and had sensed no presence.

“You scare me in your own way, you know…” I said with a sigh of relief. I was of course used to this place, I’d even made it my abode for a time. But it was still an abandoned building–I’m going to be scared if someone shows up behind me out of the blue in this situation. “Don’t just pop up like that. Just because your name has the character for ‘stealth’ in it, you think you can sneak up on people?”

“Hmph. What about you, Wet’n’soggy? However much of a grudge you hold over what happened during spring break, you shouldn’t abuse our li’l vampire like that.”

“I’m not abusing her.”

“I believe treating a young girl like a dog more than qualifies as abuse, Wet’n’soggy.”

Good grief, Oshino exhaled with an exaggerated shrug.

“My guess,” he continued, “would be that you brought those donuts as a gift for me–oh dear, I missed my chance to eat some.”

“……”

He grinned as he spoke in the same tone as always, like he saw through everything.

And he could stop calling me Wet'n'soggy.

It just felt like a different character's schtick, for some reason.

He was sabotaging future material.

But that aside–Mèmè Oshino.

An old dude in his thirties.

Had made his appearance.

A visibly frivolous, delinquent middle-aged guy who wore Hawaiian shirts year-round. An expert on aberrations, an authority on yokai apparitions, a ghoul and goblin technocrat–those were his titles, and he had the shady vibes to match.

I've heard mysterious info along the lines of him being made to look and sound really cool in the anime, but who cares.

He looked like a suspicious dude to me no matter what.

You could say a bizarre dude.

"I may not have told you, Araragi, but I love sweets–if there's ever another opportunity like this one, please do save some for me. Old-fashioneds are my favorite. The name matches my personality, you see."

"Oh, shut it. There's nothing old-fashioned about you."

There's nothing more annoying than adults who try to cast how out of touch they are in some kind of classical light–though I do agree that those old-fashioned donuts are tasty.

When I looked over at the girl vampire, she'd finished eating both the old fashioned and the Pon de Ring and was back in her usual spot in the corner of the classroom, in her usual pose with her arms

wrapped around her legs, with an expression that said, “What? Excuse me? Mister Donut? I’ve never heard of him.”

If anyone here was acting a certain way because of what happened over spring break, it was her–she seemed to want to avoid looking disgraceful to Oshino.

Despite her best efforts, though, she couldn’t hide the mess around her lips.

But, well.

Not that he was anyone I should be comparing myself to, but at the very least, she seemed to have more feelings for me than Oshino–that little fact brought me relief.

…Of course, it could have just been that she didn’t care about me at all.

“Fine,” I promised, “next time I’ll get a box of old-fashioneds–I think I’m about to hit a good number of Mister Donut points, too. So, Oshino. Where were you this late at night?” Judging by his demeanor, he hadn’t been sleeping in another classroom.

“Eh. Work, you know.” Oshino put on no airs as he replied, but he did sound like he was, as ever, playing dumb. “The reason a rolling stone like myself has decided to stay in this town, and the reason I even came to this town in the first place, is to collect stories of aberrations–but of course, my most important job now is to deal with the aftermath of what you did.”

“The aftermath?” I glanced over to the squatting vampire, who already seemed uninterested in our conversation. “You mean taking care of her like this?”

“That’s part of it, but it’s not everything–vampires are actually quite annoying to deal with, you see. They’re the king of aberrations, after all–and so their mere presence can cause all sorts of

phenomena. They constantly stimulate and influence everything around them. The job I've taken off of your hands is to handle all of that in a tidy way."

"So a lot of different jobs at once? Almost like Boogiepop or something. You must be happy, sounds like business is booming."

Then again, if you put my five million yen aside, all that aberration story collecting or whatever didn't sound like any kind of "job" that brought in money.

"Things aren't going Boogiepop well for me, unfortunately–my brain isn't built in a way that lets me think about multiple things at once. By the way," Oshino went on, "going back to what we were talking about earlier–don't bully our vampire too much. You're just going to make problems for yourself in the future."

"Like I said, I'm not bullying her."

I did feel a bit like my joking around had gone too far, but she'd done most of it herself. I won't claim to be an innocent bystander caught up in it all, but she'd taken me along on a ride, pretty much.

I asked Oshino, "Actually, I'd been wondering ever since spring break, but did she get, like, mentally younger, too?"

While her body now appeared to be that of an eight-year-old, she used to look like a dignified young lady–no matter how *tugged along* vampires were by their appearance, her fundamental age still had to be five hundred.

Even eight-year-olds don't eat like dogs, anyway.

"Well, Araragi, what's she supposed to do? It's not just vampires. All aberrations are made up of human beliefs."

"Human beliefs?"

“Yup. They’re there because humans think they are–that’s what an aberration is. Behind every ghost is a silver tongue. But that doesn’t make them any less real.”

“Huh? I’m not sure I get your point. I guess faith works in mysterious ways, but how does that have anything to do with her?”

“Vampires are the strongest aberration because everyone believes that vampires are the strongest aberration. Aberrations manifest as those around them recognize them–and behave as those around them expect them to.”

That’s how it goes, Oshino added.

He cast a glance at the vampire. Even if looks could kill, this was a soft one, with no pressure or anything else behind it, and wouldn’t kill an insect.

“As for our li’l vampire–Araragi, you are currently the only person who recognizes her.”

“……”

“Missy class president and I do too, strictly speaking, but it’s still you who has the greatest influence on her. You are her one and only source of nutrition, after all. That’s a super direct influence.”

“So–you’re saying she looks this way now *because that’s what I think*?”

No.

I could accept that my influence was making her like Mister Donut, but eating like a dog… If that was the kind of behavior I expected from a vampire, I had some pretty bad issues I needed to work out. I seriously required some counseling. It was still the dead of night, but I should pick up a phone and make an appointment right now.

“I might be immature compared to you or Hanekawa and do see her as an eight-year-old in some ways–but this can’t be what I expect of her,” I objected.

“A child doesn’t always turn out the way his parents want him to. Still, he’s influenced by his parents’ expectations–it’s kind of like that.”

“His parents’…expectations.” Influenced–by your home environment.

“I’m not going to give you some tired old talk about needing to become an honest citizen, but if you keep on messing around, you might end up not just having an influence on her, but a bad one. Especially given.”

Oshino stopped there.

And he didn’t continue.

A pause in the conversation out of consideration for me–this probably was not. Oshino wasn’t so considerate. He simply didn’t have to say it, which is why he didn’t–and really, I didn’t have to hear it.

Especially given.

Especially given how that proud vampire was reduced to an innocent little child–why pile on a bad influence?

That’s what he meant.

But I had to agree with Oshino in part–even if they don’t turn out the way you want them to, this vampire had met one of my expectations, at least.

That is–she didn’t forgive me.

She neither laughed nor spoke.

The vampire–didn't forgive me.

Just as I didn't forgive the vampire.

"So, Araragi. If you're feeding her donuts, does that mean you're all done with your vampire duty today?"

"Vampire duty…" I wasn't doing chores. "Not yet. How rare of you to guess wrong. Donuts first, blood sucking next. She seems to like them better than my blood. I'm in the middle of being grief-stricken over the fact."

"Huh. Well, your blood doesn't seem like it'd be very sweet. I think I can sympathize with her."

Yes, yes, Oshino nodded to himself.

The bastard, acting so convinced.

"By the way, Araragi. She came up for a brief second just now, but how is missy class president doing?"

"Huh?"

Really? That was a sudden question.

He asked it almost as though he knew I'd run into Hanekawa in the afternoon, but maybe it was just that all-knowing tone of his–and yet once I thought about it some more, that wasn't it.

Upon reconsideration, Oshino always seemed to be oddly concerned about Hanekawa.

He asked me about her every opportunity he got.

Actually, I wouldn't say he was concerned about Hanekawa–more like, concerned about her *doings.*

That made more sense.

Oshino seemed awfully wary of Hanekawa thanks to spring break–putting aside whether his wariness was genuine, from his point of view someone like her had to seem like a handful.

“That girl would be a handful whoever you are,” Oshino gently corrected my unspoken impression. That’s what I mean by his all-knowing tone. “Even for you, of course–while our li’l vampire’s arrival really warped the aberration situation in this town, by that token, missy class president’s presence is warping the human situation in this town significantly.”

“We both know that’s an exaggeration.”

“An exaggeration is just enough when we’re talking about her. You have to be audacious and bombastic. Truly, with that girl.”

So how’s she doing? he asked.

“What do you mean, how? Fine. She’s well.”

“Really?”

God, he was persistent.

No, if he was being persistent, that was because he was suspicious of my dismissive reaction (or my attempt to get off the topic.)

If he was going to ask me really, then the answer was no, not really.

It was really a lie.

But we were talking about Hanekawa’s home environment. It didn’t seem right for me to air it out where I was.

The story of the gauze on her left cheek–and the story behind it, too.

I promised I wouldn't tell anyone.

Even Oshino.

"Hm, I see. So you can't tell."

But, and perhaps you could say as always, Oshino needed only my momentary pause over whether or not to reply to figure out my predicament.

"Which means–it's fair to assume that something unspeakable has happened to her? That's worrying."

"It's nothing you need to be worrying about." Of course, nor was it something–I needed to be worrying about. "It's Hanekawa's problem, nothing we should butt into. No matter what happens, she's just going to go and save herself–that's the only way, right?"

"Hmph. Okay, then I won't press you." I'd been sure he meant to hound me for more the way things were progressing, but he backed off without a fight. "It isn't my place to comment on how you and missy class president are flirting with each other, anyway."

"Hold on, we aren't flirting–"

"Flip her skirt or whatever, it isn't my place to comment."

"What do you know?!"

"Why don't we take the opposite approach," Oshino ignored my attempt to excuse myself. "Tell me everything *aside from what you can't tell me.* It's not as if you can't say a thing about her, right?"

"……"

Well, he was right–I couldn't just keep mum if he went with that approach.

While I ought to stay away from everything about her household situation and how her father had hit her–it wasn't as if I needed to hide everything surrounding that.

At least, it'd be fine to tell him that we'd met on the street today–yesterday if we were going by the calendar–and that we'd talked a little.

Oshino probably wasn't going to back down either way.

At least, not without a fight.

And so, I talked about what happened that day while carefully–or maybe not, I don't know–concealing the parts I'd been silenced about.

While hiding the places that needed to be hidden.

Starting with my little sisters waking me up that morning.

Running into Hanekawa.

And finally–burying a cat that had been run over.

I gave him the details.

"Araragi."

And then Oshino–

Mèmè Oshino.

Taking a cigarette out from his Hawaiian shirt pocket and putting it in his mouth without lighting it.

"Don't tell me…this was a silver cat?" asked Mèmè Oshino.

You've been patient thus far.

You have my thanks.

Time for the main story.

006

This is going to sound horrible, but I really hadn't placed that much importance on *that.*

After all–if I was with Hanekawa, it was practically a daily occurrence for me to do something like minister to a dead cat on the street.

I'd done that kind of thing tons of times.

Just like the way she had saved me during spring break.

Hanekawa–buried the cat, that was all.

Like it was the obvious thing to do.

Asking, "Will you help me, Araragi?"

In the same way she'd always ask, with the same smile, as if she'd forgotten all about any gauze that might've been on her face.

She held in her arms the cat's dead body, run over so many times that I couldn't tell what color its fur was. It could have once been so white it shined, but now it was something else, maybe blood red, maybe dirt black.

Like she loved it.

Like she cherished it.

She held it.

There are enough people who love cats that "as though loving a cat" is an expression in Japanese–and I don't hate them, either–but even if it hadn't been run over, I doubt many people would be able to cradle a dead cat in their arms.

When I considered that.

When I thought that.

I felt–agitated again.

I wanted to say something.

But I couldn't in the end.

"A *Sawarineko.* An Afflicting Cat."

I don't know, would you call it fate? My plan had been to give the girl vampire my blood, hand the donuts to Oshino, then go right back home so that I could rest my lazy bones, but that wasn't happening.

I ended up getting stuck helping Oshino with his job.

No, I probably shouldn't phrase it in a way that makes me sound like some kind of victim–I had to heed a request from someone I owed five million yen, especially if it had something to do with Hanekawa.

In fact, helping him wasn't enough.

I practically wanted to take the lead.

"A mammal belonging to Carnivora Felidae," said–Oshino.

A cat.

"Afflicting Cats are one of the aberrations I've been collecting stories about here in this town–*that* is actually what I was out until just now looking for. I guess this is what you'd call a coincidence–but it's not a very welcome one if it is. Borrowing from an old friend of mine, I can't help but sense some kind of malice."

"Wait–hold on, Oshino." His words left me a bit confused–or rather, I barely understood a thing at all, and I could only reflexively and thoughtlessly argue about the surface details. "Maybe I didn't do a good job explaining? The cat Hanekawa and I buried wasn't any aberration. It was a real, living–formerly living–cat. An actual one. Not a nonexistent one, but one that exists. It looked like it had been

run over by a car–like you described, it didn't have a tail, and now that I think about it, its fur was a silverish white–but it wasn't any aberration or yokai, but an honest-to-goodness–"

"Right. It wasn't."

I would agree with you. Normally, Oshino said.

He didn't get riled up and shut down my objection–he was being just as frivolous as ever. Always trying to maintain the balance, always trying to stay neutral–Oshino's Oshinoesque behavior encapsulated who Mèmè Oshino was.

He was the same as always–and yet.

When I looked at his mouth, the unlit cigarette hanging out of it, I thought I saw the slightest bit of gravity there.

I thought I saw some bit of truth there.

And it probably wasn't my imagination.

If I had to say why–it was because of Hanekawa.

"But Araragi–*missy class president isn't normal.* We've had more than enough arguments on that point and I don't want to go into it now, but–that girl is seriously dangerous."

"Sure, I do understand why you might be wary of her."

"This isn't about caution. What about our li'l vampire?" Oshino deftly used the cigarette in his mouth to indicate the girl in the corner of the classroom. "Yes, it's on you that she's in that not-alive, not-dead, half-and-half state–but at the very bottom of the root of it, it's something missy class prez arranged for, too."

"Well–yeah."

Spring break.

Yes, I had been saved by Hanekawa–no one would save me, but Hanekawa did. I could never be too grateful to her for that.

Yet–however.

Logically speaking, if not for Hanekawa, what happened over spring break might *never even have occurred.*

It didn't matter that she didn't will or intend for any of it to happen–that she had no purpose or motive–still, even I had to admit that she'd put out a fire of her own setting.

"Exactly," Oshino approved. "She put out a fire of her own setting. She's a dreadful girl, like the living embodiment of the butterfly effect–chaos without reserve. What a talented director. What a terrifying producer. Such a trivial, cliché, and even heartwarming little episode like burying a cat that had been run over is liable to turn into an incident that shakes heaven and earth if she gets her hands on it. And–it's especially bad that it's a cat. *Missy class prez and an Afflicting Cat are made for each other.*"

"……"

This Afflicting Cat or whatever aberration he was pursuing–I didn't milk him about it. Mostly because we didn't have the time, but I think that deep inside, a part of me didn't want to ask.

Right.

Right, me too.

I'd had a bad feeling from the start.

From when?

From the time we buried the cat? No.

From the time I saw the gauze on the left side of her face? No.

Probably–*from the first time I met Hanekawa.*

I must have known.

And so.

“Oshino,” I said–omitting any more pointless objections. This was no place to argue. “In that case, what do I need to do? If, say, something is happening right now–”

“No, chances are nine out of ten nothing’s happened. And I’d like to leave it that way, with nothing happening. I’m just being prepared. It doesn’t hurt to be prepared, that’s all–the chances aren’t even a tenth, more like one in a million. But when you think of the risks, it’s better to over-prepare. No need to look so worried, Araragi.”

Oshino finished with a jab at how alert I must have seemed, but I wasn’t sure. He sounded like he was only trying to ease my mind for the time being. Like it wasn’t what he thought at all, and it wasn’t just a tenth or a millionth for him.

No, maybe those really were the odds.

But–one in ten or one in a million, it didn’t matter. There was a common understanding between me and Oshino that Tsubasa Hanekawa was the kind of woman who could beat those odds without breaking a sweat.

She–maybe not others, but she–was seriously dangerous.

“You know, the fact that it’s a *headache* has been worrying me too, personally,” Oshino shared. “It’d be nice if it’s a meaningless red herring. Well, Araragi, why don’t we go ahead and split up here? I’ll go *dig up* the white cat you two buried. I guess I’ll be desecrating a grave.”

“D-Desecrating a grave…”

“Yes, it’s the kind of thing that gets you cursed–but I do think it’s the least I should do. If the cat buried there is just a regular cat, then fine. Happily ever after, all’s well that ends well. Any punishment

that comes my way won't be a problem. I gladly accept it. I've always been like a drum, anyway."

"I don't know if you're a drum–in fact, I don't even know what you're trying to say–but basically, I just need to tell you where we buried the cat? I just need to take you there?"

"Of course you're going to be telling me, but there's no need for you to act as my guide. Just tell me roughly where it is, and I'll manage to get to the little kitty's grave."

"Huh–"

So all that living as a vagabond wasn't just for show.

He didn't even need to be familiar with the terrain–no wonder he'd taken these ruins that even locals weren't familiar with and made them into his headquarters.

"I don't mind telling you, of course," I said. "But it's not a place I spend a whole lot of time around, so it'll be hard for me to pinpoint the exact spot. Actually, I think I can only give you a rough location, is that going to be okay?"

"It's fine," Oshino nodded.

He didn't so much as attempt to make a sarcastic remark in reply to my unreliability–which ended up telling me just how pressing the situation was.

Still–a pressing situation?

Maybe nothing at all had happened yet–but the situation was already pressing?

Was it like wartime?

"You're going to have a very important responsibility instead, Araragi."

"Hm?"

“Remember what I said? This is why we’ll be splitting up–you’re going to approach missy class president *directly.*”

“D-Directly?”

“*You’re going to visit missy class prez’s house right now.* Then you’ll actually see her and look at her face and into her eyes and talk to her, and you’re going to make sure she’s okay.”

Oshino went on like he was saying something obvious–but I was left speechless.

What? Visit her house?

“Hey, don’t be ridiculous, Oshino. What time do you think it is?”

“Nighttime. The middle of the night, too. That’s precisely why you’re going–in a way, it’d be meaningless at any other hour. I don’t think I need to bring up the witching hour and whatnot for you to know that aberrations are most active right now. In other words, it’s easiest to tell a positive from a negative.”

“Sure, I know that firsthand from spring break, but…” There was this thing in the world called having common sense. Visiting the house of a classmate of the opposite sex in the middle of the night was a clear example of lacking it.

“It’s fine for you to use uncommon sense here since we’re in an uncommon situation. In fact, you need to be using it. Worst case, she looks down on you in contempt.”

“That really would be the worst.”

Well.

Maybe she already did after this afternoon, and on that note, she very well might have been holding me in contempt since spring break. Come to think of it, now was a strange time to start worrying about it.

Disdained to begin with.

What a tragic fact.

“I guess it’s not like we could reverse our roles,” I admitted. “I wouldn’t be able to judge if the buried cat is a regular one–”

“Right. And you’re probably the better judge as to *whether there’s anything unusual about missy class prez.*”

You are friends, after all, he appended with a touch of cynicism or a hint of sarcasm–even so, I found the words oddly motivating.

Yes.

Aberrations were one thing–but when it came to Hanekawa?

I was more of a specialist in that field than Oshino.

“Oh. But Oshino, I don’t know where her house is.”

“Huh? Really? That’s weird. Aren’t you two in the same class? Don’t you have a student directory or something?”

“What year do you think it is? They’re careful about managing personal information these days–even if you’re friends with someone, you’re only going to have their cell number and email. It’s normal to not even know what station someone lives near.”

“What an awful age. How’s a leisurely luddite like me supposed to keep up?” The leisurely luddite furrowed his brow like he was honestly upset. If you were so bad with gadgets that you didn’t even own a cell phone or a PHS, I guess it really was an awful age. “Still, you and she have been pretty close for a month now if you count spring break. It’s not like you have no idea at all, right? You must have figured out roughly where she lives from bits and pieces you picked up in conversations, or how long it takes her to meet you somewhere.”

“Stop it, you’re making me sound like a stalker…”

Sure.

I did have a rough idea.

Who wouldn't? (Whistles innocently)

It'd be a disgrace to the name Koyomi Araragi if I couldn't pull off that much.

The girl vampire, her blond head buried in her knees, seemed completely indifferent to our conversation–and with that.

I raced through the dark town on my mountain bike.

I did have my headlight on, but I didn't need it. Since I hadn't forgotten to give the vampire my blood on my way out (She somehow seemed to savor the donuts more. That did hurt), my body was now reasonably vampiric. I could see far into the distance whether I was in a dark room or the dark of night.

True, a headlight was also a sign that told pedestrians, "There's a bike here," so I would be a hazard if I didn't turn it on eventually.

"Sheesh. This is getting bad–and how am I supposed to see Hanekawa at her house so late?"

The sooner, the better–and nighttime was best.

But it was still pretty unreasonable.

That was true for any household, but Hanekawa's in particular was troubled and warped–the way she'd described it that afternoon didn't make it seem like the kind of environment that would welcome a classmate visiting in the middle of the night.

And if things really went wrong.

"Hmm, I did hide that part from Oshino–but I don't see him changing his mind on what has to be done because of that."

And either way, we couldn't switch jobs. Putting aside whether he'd notice anything different about her, visiting a girl's home in the middle of the night was a tall order even for that crafty old veteran.

He was a sketchy older guy to begin with, but when you added all the wear and tear from living in an abandoned building, he looked even shabbier than he did when they met over spring break.

He was exactly the kind of suspicious person they teach you to look out for.

Maybe a drifter.

Maybe a tofu delivery boy.

If someone called the police, then in my case, they'd see me as a kid playing a prank. I would use my privileges as a minor to the fullest extent.

"Plus I'm a chicken, according to Hanekawa–I could never do something unholy like defile a grave."

We wanted the right man in the right place.

And as I'd convinced myself of that, I came to a stop.

Judging by the address hanging under the stoplight, I was in the area I surmised to be Hanekawa's neighborhood–her home turf.

I'd play it by ear in terms of conducting myself during the visit–that wasn't the immediate issue.

I had to locate which house was hers first.

…Don't be ridiculous.

"First"?

Talk about an ordeal.

No matter how remote our town was, this was still a residential area–on the way, I'd foolhardily pictured going through and looking

at every nameplate on every house, one by one, but I realized how much work that would be.

It was like being forced to open a four-digit combination lock using nothing but patience.

You'd definitely lose heart at some point.

No, with the lock, at least you were guaranteed to arrive at the right combination if you kept at it. Here, though, there was a strong possibility that my initial assumption was wrong–I merely believed that Hanekawa's home was in this area.

We're talking about Hanekawa. Maybe she'd made it difficult to figure out this info–wait, just how distrustful of me was she if that were true?

She'd have been treating me like a stalker.

"Ugh. A cat with no tail? Though I've heard that cats don't need their tails," I muttered as I got back on my mountain bike.

If I wanted to be especially careful, I'd proceed at a deliberate pace and check every single nameplate, but there was no need for that. A vampire's powerful sight applied to dynamic vision as well–and it seemed like my visual field had grown wider, too. Though I wasn't going to be quite so lazy, I felt like I could ride my bike at a real speed and not miss a single nameplate on either side of the street.

I psyched myself back up to do at least one pass through the entire area, from corner to corner, and kicked myself forward.

This was a one-man blanket search.

Yeah. So what if I lost heart?

When I thought back to what Hanekawa did for me over spring break, it didn't matter if my heart got tossed into a sinkhole, never to be seen again. It didn't begin to match up.

And.

All of that determination still ended up fruitless.

Any determination I ever had always came out to nothing.

I was way too late.

If I were really concerned about Hanekawa, if I really wanted to do something for her, then whether she rejected me, silenced me, or even, yes, looked down on me–I should have stormed into her home that afternoon.

I'd been racing the clock.

And the clock won.

"–Oh."

Just as I'd reached the end of a wide street and turned the corner.

I'd been rolling along sure that I'd never pass anyone at this hour, but then, in front of me, a surprise.

A surprise…

A surprise attack.

Improbably.

Improperly–it appeared.

Totally absurdly–it appeared.

No, *it* happened to be there–*it* was just there, so suggesting that it chose to appear in front of me, like it was lying in wait for me, even, was unfair.

That would be far too self-absorbed of me.

Not everything revolves around me.

It wasn't destiny, and it wasn't even fortuity.

Our paths crossed simply as a matter of course–because to *it,* I was an insignificant, stunted little thing not even worth being aware of.

As–humans were to an aberration.

It was so late at night that even the streetlights seemed hazy and distant.

There, illuminated by the LED stuck onto the handlebars of my mountain bike, was none other than–

The class president among class presidents you know well.

It was Tsubasa Hanekawa.

“Huh? But…”

But. However.

Almost no one who saw her then would have puzzled out and posited that it was Hanekawa.

Not even her parents.

Though I realize just how ironic that last observation is–

“Hanekawa…is that you?”

She was white.

She was white.

She was white.

Her very being–seemed to be pure whiteness.

White as a wedding dress.

It might be an odd comparison to make during Golden Week, but it was what people mean when they say white as snow.

Hanekawa's hair, usually a beautiful jet black, as dark as a raven's feathers, was now a nearly transparent white–and her already-fair skin was now almost sickly white.

A change.

I was overwhelmed by her attire, too, as she was there in nothing but a bra and panties, not even shoes or socks, like she'd leapt straight out of the bathroom–but that underwear alone, in contrast to the rest of her, was black.

Conspicuously.

Extremely–black.

But the black was one I could personally recall. I was sure it was the color Hanekawa had worn that afternoon–how could I ever forget?

A dark black that seemed to suck you in.

It's not as if it was the deciding factor, but I was convinced that the being in front of me was Tsubasa Hanekawa.

The shape of her hips was–no, forget about that.

Even if we shouldn't, I'm putting it aside.

The question.

More than why she was in her underwear, or why her hair had changed color too completely and naturally for it to have been dyed–the far more salient question…

"Mrow."

Was that *cat ears* had sprouted from her head.

An Afflicting–Cat.

"Mrow," she–purred.

Purr, her throat said.

“H-Hanekawa.”

“Ah–and who are you? Are you one of my *myaster’s* friends?” asked Hanekawa–no.

Asked the Afflicting Cat.

The tone, the voice, indeed, even the expression–was nothing like Hanekawa’s.

They had little in common with her.

The Hanekawa in front of me only happened to be her and wasn’t her at all.

She’d never speak in such a sweet kitty voice, nor ever wear the savage expression that stood in contrast to her purring, as if she was ready to bite me at any moment.

What could–this be?

This phenomenon?

She was Hanekawa–but seemed totally different.

So utterly different that she acted as a contrast.

No, not a contrast, this was the polar opposite.

The complete flip side–and therefore identical.

“Myaa-haha! Ya know, I do think I myight remember ya. *I saw ya with her when she buried me*–hmph. That’s purrfect, then,” the Afflicting Cat said with a grin, paying no heed to my confusion.

Eyes narrowed to a point.

“I don’t understand the furst thing about how this works, but you’re supposed to lend a paw to a friend in need, yes? In that case, I’ll let ya deal with *these guys,*” she continued.

Then *thud*–threw something at my feet.

No, she'd actually thrown two objects my way, so I guess the sound effect was *thud, thud*?

But it seemed like a single, unified mass.

A lone clump.

"Wha–"

My mind wasn't working anywhere close to normal after those successive shocks–but maybe that was actually a good thing.

Not even this could surprise me now.

Right.

Even *two humans*–being thrown at my feet.

"……nkk!"

Okay, I was surprised.

So surprised that my voice stuck in my throat.

I thought I was going to fall over, bike and all.

But–from *where* had the Afflicting Cat brought these two?

Did she have them with her from the start?

Given the situation, it seemed like the only possibility–the impact of Hanekawa in cat ears and underwear was so powerful that the Afflicting Cat dangling two humans managed to slip past me.

Or.

Was it because the two remained so still as to seem dead, and continued to be? Had my subconscious pushed their existence beyond my conscious mind because they were like corpses?

"What was it nyow–ahh, right. Those are my myaster's 'parents' or something. I don't really nyoh," remarked the Afflicting Cat.

With a wicked grin.

She seemed to be enjoying herself–but that was all.

There was nothing else there.

“I guess that means these are people my myaster *doesn’t need.* Nyot even worth killing. Nyot even worth tormenting. Totally worthless. So, friend, you take care of them as ya see fit–go ahead and kill them if ya wanna. Get mad and take ’em to task for what they did to my myaster.”

Then, the Afflicting Cat turned her back to me.

Maybe my thoughts were poisoned by too much anime and manga because I expected her to have a cat’s tail to go along with the ears she’d grown–and I don’t know if I should say “sadly” or “unfortunately” about this, but her rear was nothing more than a smooth, gentle curve.

Of course it was.

The Afflicting Cat–was a cat with no tail.

“H-Hey! Wait a second! Hanekawa!”

I nearly kicked my mountain bike to the side as I got off of it–and yelled after her. My arm outstretched. She seemed to be going back the way she came, and I wasted no time in chasing after her–but that wasn’t happening.

Hanekawa.

She.

The Afflicting Cat–suddenly turned around.

“‘Wait’?” she muttered.

With honest spite–and malice in her voice.

My thoughtless words.

They'd made her snap.

I could see the veins on her temples bulge–and her pupils turn red.

She bared her fangs.

"Stop expecting my myaster to do every little thing ya want, ya dumbass!"

It's because of people like you that my myaster's ended up like this!

And as soon as she said that–the Afflicting Cat leapt toward me.

No, describing what she did as leaping toward me rings hollow. It's a lie as pale as that cat, and quite vain of me. The accurate way to describe it is that she'd *finished* leaping.

But that's a terrifying fact.

So terrifying it made me want to avoid grasping it accurately–after all, as I mentioned earlier, I'd just given the girl vampire my blood. In other words, my body, and my vision in particular, had been enhanced–the Afflicting Cat was moving at a speed that I couldn't perceive even in my current condition.

Nothing should have eluded my vision at that moment.

And it wasn't only her speed that was terrifying.

Her power was just as immeasurable.

As a cat would catch a mouse–she bit down on my left arm and, with just the force of her fangs and jaw, took everything from my shoulder down, sleeve and all, and tore it from my body with a meaty crunch as if she were plucking a piece of ripe fruit from an overburdened branch.

"Ah… AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGGGGHHHH!"

In the center of this residential area, in the middle of the night, I let out a pathetic, lame scream like a girl being attacked by some weirdo. But who could blame me–I'd had a lot, and I mean a lot, done to me over spring break, but no one had ever ripped my arm off through sheer force.

Not to mention that I wasn't as immortal as I was over spring break.

I no longer had the kind of healing ability that would let me recover a lost arm in the blink of an eye–my shoulder began to gush a fountain of blood.

There was so much blood I was surprised how much of it I contained.

"Ow… OWWWWWWWWWWW!"

"Stop making so much nyoise. I barely did a thing."

No human could blame me.

But there was a cat who did–who stepped on my head with her bare feet as I keeled over against a street light, my torn left arm still in her mouth.

I couldn't move.

I couldn't fight back.

I couldn't even shove away the foot that was stepping on me.

Moreover, I felt like I was growing weaker thanks to it–a strange illusion.

In fact, it was as though being stepped on was beginning to ease the pain in my left shoulder–unbelievable!

How much of a pervert was I that Hanekawa stepping on me eased my pain?!

And it wasn't so much easing as getting numb–

"*Your slight pain*–is a mosquito bite compared to the suffering my myaster bore for all this time."

"…Your master."

Do you mean Hanekawa? I tried to ask the obvious question–but couldn't.

It was because I didn't have the strength left to talk, true–but it was so obvious that there was no need to ask, anyway.

It was too pellucid, too spotless, too unimpeachable.

I knew it so well–I knew it too well.

"You got it, human."

Which is why the Afflicting Cat–answered the question without having to hear it.

"My myaster has me now. So she doesn't nyeed you. She doesn't nyeed her parents, or her friends, or anyone else. She *doesn't even nyeed–herself.*"

Then, the Afflicting Cat spat out the arm in her mouth–like it was a piece of garbage. It thumped to the ground right in front of my face.

"I-I don't need it," I said.

"I'm going to set my myaster free–freer than anyone else. You know that's something you people could nyever do. All you did was tie her down and keep her from being free–"

So first.

I'm going to start by freeing her of this Earth-sized stress.

With that, the Afflicting Cat–leapt into the air.

"Flew" might be a better term.

She soared more than she jumped.

Barely bending her knees and only crouching for a moment, she bounded upward–past the telephone pole, past the power line, and past the roof of the home in front of us–disappearing into the black night.

That wasn't called jumping.

It surpassed human capabilities–it seems a little late to be saying this, but it was clearly the act of an aberration.

Almost like she'd grown wings.

She wasn't "a tiger with wings"–but a winged cat.

"…Hanekawa."

Tsubasa Hanekawa.

The girl with a pair–of mismatched wings.

Whatever led to things turning out this way–I barely had the first idea, but Oshino's concerns had been completely on the mark.

Bull's eye.

With every one of his shots.

And–and.

Once again, I hadn't made it in time.

I was–too late.

"Ah… Guh."

I stood up, sluggishly, and used my remaining arm to pick up the one the Afflicting Cat had dropped. Though I was surprised by just how heavy my own arm was, I brought it to where it had been sliced off–it was messier than the clean cross-section implied by "slice"–and stuck wound to wound in an attempt at regeneration.

Since I couldn't hope for auto-regen, my only option was to recycle this *junk*–it wasn't a treatment I'd ever attempted over spring break, but according to all the trivia about vampires in anime and manga, I'd be able to reconnect my flesh and nerves or whatever that way.

"……"

There were no traces of Hanekawa or the Afflicting Cat left in the hazy blur that was my vision–just my mountain bike that had collapsed on its side, as well as the two human beings, also collapsed.

Two human beings.

Parents–a father and a mother.

Hanekawa's parents.

Hanekawa's dad, Hanekawa's mom.

Her parents who weren't related to her by blood–whose hearts were unrelated to hers.

Family.

But why was it?

Even though I'd been so infuriated by them that afternoon, as I saw them there, collapsed on the ground like they were lifeless, like they were dead–I didn't feel anything in particular.

I didn't get any angrier.

I didn't gloat and feel better.

I didn't feel the smallest bit of anything.

I couldn't get mad at them or blame them.

All I could do was feel–bad for them, normally.

I just felt sorry for them.

From Hanekawa's perspective, they deserved nothing but blame–yet somehow they looked so much like victims to me.

007

There's a big hole in my memory after that.

In other words, the incredible pain from my arm getting torn off together with the anemia from massive blood loss caused me to pass out–but, in the way of making people think, *You've got more guts than I knew! Hey, you're pretty cool,* I'll mention that I apparently did a number of things I needed to do up until the moment I passed out.

I just don't remember them.

The brain seems to work in such a way that we forget all our memories from right before going unconscious too, and that's exactly what happened to me.

So I'd like you to know in advance that what follows is a mish-mash of vague conjecture, sketchy hearsay, and hollow, faint memories.

Anyway.

The very first thing I did once the Afflicting Cat left was to clean up after its mess.

I was still in the middle of things so "after" isn't right, but I did need to take care of the site.

I used a cell phone to call for an ambulance–except I didn't use mine. I made the call with the one I found on Hanekawa's parents, in her dad's pocket.

Maybe I was being overly cautious, but I didn't want the emergency center to have my cell phone number. Blocking caller ID wouldn't guarantee my anonymity, and anyway, I wanted to be sure.

They'd record my voice, but that couldn't be helped–actually, I doubt I was able to think that far ahead. The blood that ought to have gone to my brain was splattered all over the pavement.

But that's where being a vampire comes in.

Usually–putting aside what "usually" might mean in such a situation–you'd need a ton of water and a deck brush to take care of a residential street covered in blood, but aberrations are beings who transcend the laws of physics.

Around the time I had given the emergency center my current location (I tried speaking in a weird voice just in case. Like an alien or something. It must have made me sound so suspicious), my splattered blood had completely evaporated.

With no blood to course through my head, I saw this phenomenon and thought:

"……"

I only looked at what happened, not really questioning it.

Questioning.

No, I wouldn't have questioned my blood evaporating–I'd seen it so many times over spring break I was tired of it.

If anything.

The fact that it took so long for the blood to evaporate–that's what I should have questioned.

The phenomenon that was the street staying not watered but blooded right until my phone call was finished–there was something clearly off about that *unnatural phenomenon,* and I should have noticed.

"……"

Then again, I didn't have the time to think it through. The ambulance I'd called would arrive in no time. You hear about ambulances getting sent from one hospital to another before being able to drop off a patient, but as far as getting to the scene of an incident goes, they're pretty fast.

That meant I needed to run soon.

My body (especially then) wasn't something I could show to a doctor–if I did need one, I was probably better off going to a veterinarian.

For an unorthodox reattachment of an arm torn off a shoulder, I'd have to catch Dr. Minoru Kamiya working on a day off.

Somehow, on my unsteady feet, I managed to get my mountain bike upright before straddling on it and taking off at full speed.

By this point, I don't remember what I was thinking. But if you were to stick a monologue on it, I might wail:

"Aw shucks! This is the last time I bother with aberrations!"

Then a black circle would come in from the edges to frame me from the back as I biked away–but unfortunately, it wasn't over yet.

It wasn't even the commercial break yet.

It was dreadfully, and without pause…continuing.

I've forgotten everything that happened on the road too, but judging by the tears on parts of my clothes that the Afflicting Cat didn't particularly assault–my knees, my right sleeve–it seems that I fell over multiple times while riding my bike.

Those scrapes had fully healed by the time I regained consciousness–hence I didn't notice until Oshino told me later.

It was all so hazy to me that I'd fallen over and not noticed.

I couldn't think about anything.

I didn’t want to think about anything.

And in that foggy mindset, I pointed the handlebars of my mountain bike not to my home where my little sisters slept but to the abandoned former cram school.

At that point, you could say, I’d unconsciously given up on being roused by my sisters in the morning–and.

And.

And here, at last, is where my conscious brain reconnects with the present.

Where it’s given continuity.

In other words, I completely blacked out once I reached the abandoned building–so maybe my effort doesn’t earn a “Great job!” scribbled on the top of an assignment but at least a “Good effort!”

“…Ah.”

The ceiling wasn’t unfamiliar. I’d seen it before.

I’m so often woken up that naturally waking up felt odd.

It was probably the first time since spring break.

But then–I couldn’t dwell on how strange it felt thanks to the far more distinct, intense feeling of pain that ran through my left shoulder as soon as I twisted my body.

“Ugh… Where am I?”

I could have dispensed with that kind of forced line.

I was on the fourth floor of the abandoned building.

The classroom where I’d fed donuts to a girl vampire the night before–

“Wait, whoa,” I muttered.

I wanted to react in a more exaggerated way (like falling backward and doing a handstand) but couldn't with the cramping pain in my left shoulder.

The girl vampire was right next to my stretched-out body.

Right by my head.

Squatting, her arms around her legs.

Angle-wise, she was in a position where I could see her entire lower body from under her dress–and for a frightening aside, in the anime version, what this little girl wears under her dress–actually, let's leave that aside.

The real issue was the gaze she had trained on me.

It wasn't her usual look full of vengeance and hatred–and it goes without saying that it wasn't the covetous look she directed at donuts.

How do I explain it?

It was like a look–of contempt.

It was more than a look that could kill. It made you want to kill yourself.

It definitely didn't feel like she'd stayed by my side to watch over me, worried that I was still unconscious–she wouldn't have felt obliged to do so.

In fact, her eyes seemed to be saying:

Pathetic.

Shameful.

A mere cat left thee in this miserable state?

And ye call thyself a vampire thrall?

…Ridiculous.

What was I talking about? She “seemed to be saying”?

As if she–would ever say something to me.

As if she’d ever say something for me.

Why was I letting myself make it out like we enjoyed a silent understanding? She had the same sour expression as ever when I really looked at her. It was just that we were closer than usual and that I was looking up at her. That’s why I ended up feeling like something was different.

A vampire was a vampire.

And a human a human.

Two straight, parallel lines, never to intersect.

The relationship that we enjoyed–was destroyed forever during spring break.

She wasn’t going to treat me as her thrall–not now.

She wasn’t going to do that for me.

In all likelihood, she was wondering if it’d be okay to suck my blood as I lay there unconscious–I was now nothing but the source of nutrition she relied on to continue living.

A battery charger.

Even so.

She was still trying to stay alive–and I had to content myself with that.

“You’re up, Araragi?”

And then.

With timing that nearly seemed calculated–the Hawaiian-shirted dude, Mèmè Oshino, opened the classroom door and came inside.

“Aren’t you mister sleepyhead–I’ve been waiting for ages. The sun’s about to set.”

“What?”

The sun was about to set?

What, was it already that late?

I had slept that long, that deeply? Flustered, I checked my cell phone, and sure enough, it read “April 30 5:20 PM.”

Whaaaat?

I’d been asleep for over twelve hours?!

“It’d be more accurate to say you were comatose–or even unconscious and in critical condition. I thought you might just die.”

Ha haa, laughed Oshino.

Contrary to his words, he laughed as if I’d simply overslept.

He was acting the same as ever, but right now–

“O-Oshino! Hanekawa, she–”

“Yeah, I know. I’ve already heard–missy class president *turned* into a cat, didn’t she?”

My concerns were spot-on, he nodded before facing the young girl.

“That’ll do, li’l vampire,” he said.

When she heard this, she lurched up like some moss-covered statue and dragged her body with an unsteady gait to exit the classroom.

She didn’t even close the door.

“Huh?” Question marks were flourishing in my head. “What’s going on, Oshino? And why’s she up at this hour, anyway? I assumed it was still dawn because she was awake…”

“No, no. Your wounds were just so terrible–that I had our li’l vampire help out a little.”

Look, Oshino pointed to my left shoulder.

When I did, I saw a bandage wrapped around it–a strange one with odd, magical-looking characters written all over it, but still a bandage.

“You two are so connected, you’re almost too connected–I’d even say linked,” Oshino explained. “Maybe paired, actually. Your healing abilities are coupled, too. So the closer you are, the more powerful the skill–which is why I had her be near you, to raise it.”

“Hunh…”

So that’s what it was.

Then I’d forced her to pull an unreasonable all-nighter (?)–maybe that’s why something about her seemed different.

Even if–she really wasn’t taking care of me.

I was still the one being recharged.

How awful of me to assume that she was wondering if she could suck my blood.

“You should thank her later. That arm probably would’ve rotted off without her.”

“As in…necrosis?” Of course, if not for her, it would have been over for me the moment the Afflicting Cat tore off my arm. “I’ll admit

that I'm surprised. I know I can't hope to recover the way I did during spring break, but I'd just given her my blood–I thought I'd heal better than that. Assumptions are a scary thing. I was sure I'd be able to repair an arm in no time if I stuck it back on."

"Oh, so you took on the Afflicting Cat prepared to lose an arm from the start?"

"No, it's not like that…" I hadn't taken her on. I hadn't planned to fight her–by the time I noticed, before I even had the chance to notice, my arm had been torn off. "…But I don't think I would've let the Afflicting Cat get away if my arm had healed faster. I guess it was wrong of me to expect that much immortality out of myself."

"No–where you went wrong, Araragi, was in your understanding of the Afflicting Cat," Oshino said in response. "You can withstand some very considerable injuries with your current immortality. Like you said, you just fed her. You'd recover from anything short of a lethal blow in moments–you were just up against a tricky opponent this time. Or maybe not the opponent, but your compatibility was tricky."

I was still close to flat on the floor, just barely having propped up my torso. Oshino approached me and continued as he unraveled the bandage (-like object) on my left shoulder.

"The Afflicting Cat–is no good."

"N-No good?"

"You were afflicted by the Afflicting Cat–and when you suffer a flick from her, the damage isn't normal. 'Don't come into contact with the cat, and you won't get cursed,' to paraphrase a saying about the gods. Hmm. What if I said 'energy drain'?"

“Energy drain…” I’d heard the term before, but only in anime and manga, so it wasn’t like I really understood. “Um, isn’t that supposed to be a vampiric trait, if anything? I want to say that over spring break, I heard sucking blood is a way to absorb a human’s vitality–”

“Exactly. But it’s not like vampires have a patent on it–you could call it spiritual interference, too. Though the implications are a little different from what vampires do since it’s not a way to create thralls. In that sense, it’s an Afflicting Cat’s unique skill.”

“Huh–so when my left arm got torn from my body, she tore off *my immortality as well*?”

And that was why my wound took so long to heal.

Why the blood I’d spilled took so long to evaporate.

Our tricky compatibility.

Our abilities–intertwined and clashed.

Now it made sense.

Not just about my left arm–but about Hanekawa’s parents, too. The two had been weak, limp, and motionless like they were dead, but I’d seen no visible wounds.

I’d called the ambulance without understanding what had been done to them, what had happened at all, what had caused them to be in that feeble state–but I could understand if the energy had been drained from them.

Enfeebled.

Debilitated–via energy drain.

“Unlike a vampire’s ability to drain energy, there’s no need for the Afflicting Cat to drink a victim’s blood, so it’s more indirect–but as you experienced firsthand, the way it works is primitively direct

and reasonably threatening. It's not just her fangs you need to be careful of–a flick from her and it kicks in."

"Hence–the Afflicting Cat."

Incredible.

Oshino had finished unwrapping the bandage, so I looked down–my arm was fully healed, at least on the outside, without a single scar.

I had a strong feeling it was thanks to the weird bandage and not just the girl vampire staying by my side.

……

Had I helped him out to work off my debt only to get deeper into debt? Traces of that suspicion ran through my mind, but I forced myself to stop thinking about it. Anyway…

"I was pretty ignorant about Afflicting Cats," I said, "but yeah, they're definitely threatening if they can drain so much energy that it overpowers a vampire's immortality. Good thing it was my left arm that got torn off. If it was my neck, I never would've been able to put it back on, and I'd be dead."

"Ah, no. Sorry, Araragi, I guess I didn't phrase it right." While I'd mumbled a somewhat relieved reaffirmation to myself, Oshino waved it off. "By compatibility, I meant between you and the Afflicting Cat–it's not as if their powers are anywhere near a match for a vampire's."

"Huh?"

"Vampires are the king of aberrations–the apex, royalty. Their energy drain is on a completely different level. There's an unbridgeable gap between the two. If you think human society is stratified, you should see what it's like for aberrations. An Afflicting

Cat's energy drain could never hope to compete with a vampire's ability to suck blood. In terms of threatening, yes, Afflicting Cats are threatening to humans–but they're nothing to a vampire, just small fry."

"Small fry…"

That–was small fry?

That?

It definitely didn't sound right to me.

But if Oshino, the expert, said so, then–it was probably true.

"Having fed our li'l vampire, you became somewhat vampiric, but that doesn't mean much in a fight. At the end of the day, you were human. No way you could beat a full-blown aberration."

"A full-blown–aberration."

"If you were as immortal as you were over spring break–if you'd maintained that immortality, or in our li'l vampire's case, even if she's a shadow of her former self, no Afflicting Cat would stand a chance. Whether your arm is ripped off or your head is plucked off, you'd regrow it in an instant, and in the first place, it'd be too tough to tear off."

"……"

No.

While that may have been an Afflicting Cat–it was also Tsubasa Hanekawa.

Did it mean that like me over spring break, she hadn't simply been possessed by an aberration?

Had her whole existence *become* an aberration?

Turned aberrant.

Turned monstrous.

“We’re definitely dealing with an aberration that causes physical changes, but it’s hard to say. I’ll have to do some research on that–but either way, it’s clear we were too late,” Oshino said. “I went to the spot you told me about and desecrated that kitty’s grave a bit–*but there was nothing buried there.* Unless I got the wrong place, this is as bad as it can get.”

“I see.”

As bad as it could get.

I couldn’t find the will to go back out and check the spot–and it’d be pointless, anyway.

Because I’d seen for myself.

The proof that we were too late.

Because I’d–let her cast a spell on me.

Because I’d let her turn her tail on me.

“Hm. Still, your injury appears to be coming along well–while not everything seems to be connected on the *inside,* you’ll be better by tomorrow at this rate,” Oshino assured, smacking my left shoulder. It was just a light slap, but the (considerable) pain penetrated deep into my body. According to the expert, though, it seemed to be coming along well.

This seemed. That seemed.

I couldn’t be certain of a thing.

“Our li’l vampire–must be asleep by now, so thank her next time. Of course, it’s not in her interest for you to die, so sticking around for a measly afternoon was the least she could do.”

“I’m still glad she did. If she sees me as a source of needed nutrition, that means she’s trying to live.”

“Hmm. That’s not what it really means…”

Blockhead, Oshino muttered to himself.

What was that for? It felt like he’d told me off for no good reason.

“Well, fine. Araragi, you go home before your family starts worrying about you.”

“Huh?”

“The cell phone in your pocket was shaking around a bunch. Is that what they call ‘vibrate mode’?”

This made me check my phone again–I’d been too focused on the date to notice, but now I saw a ridiculous number of missed calls and text messages waiting for me.

Missed calls: 146.

Unread messages: 209.

Oh god!!

Yikes… I already knew, without checking, that they were from Karen and Tsukihi…

Oh god, oh god, oh god, oh god!

They were all one-second-long messages and subject-only texts by the end!

“This is just harassment.”

I couldn’t believe it.

No wonder I was feeling like going back to sleep.

How was I supposed to get any peaceful rest if my phone was shaking all over the place as I tried to sleep? I had to hand it to my sisters, they’d tried to wake me up despite being this far away, even if they weren’t successful. Man, they could just die.

"*Unlike missy class president,* you have a family that worries about you–so you need to go home, Araragi."

"Oh, uh–they aren't worried or anything…"

Wait, did he just say "unlike missy class president"?

What did that mean?

True, I'd scuttled back to this abandoned building and given him a report on the damage in my hazy state, but I couldn't see myself telling Oshino about Hanekawa's home environment–had a chance turn of phrase happened to hit the mark?

Or was he seeing through people again?

Since he did know that Hanekawa's parents had fallen victim, was it just a normal thing to say? Maybe not?

There was something in the nuance of his–no.

I had other things I needed to do–first.

"Stop it, Oshino–this much of an injury's nothing. I can't go home with my tail between my legs with Hanekawa in that state. We have to capture her quickly and exorcize this Afflicting Cat or whatever it is from her–"

"Spring break."

I'd started speaking to him in an excited tone–but Oshino interrupted me.

Interrupted me with his own words.

"So you want to save missy class prez this time–just as she saved you over spring break? Is that what this is, Araragi?"

"…Yeah."

The strangely probing, strangely cocksure, snarky, malicious way he asked made me not want to answer in the affirmative–but I nodded yes.

Because that's what it was, at least on an emotional level.

When he put it that way, it somehow felt a little off, but that's what it was.

No, even if it wasn't.

"You're supposed to lend a hand to a friend in need, right?" I said, remembering my conversation, if you could call it that, with the Afflicting Cat.

"Hmph. Those aren't your words, Araragi–they're hers, if anyone's. How did it go again? 'I wouldn't call someone a friend if I wasn't ready to die for them'? It's like she has the values of someone out of China's Three Kingdoms era. 'We may not have been born on the same day, but we swear to die in the same place'–was it? She'd make a great warlord if she'd been born back then."

"Don't go around comparing girls to warlords."

"But you see, Araragi. That's not possible."

Distinctly. Decisively.

Mèmè Oshino spoke like he was delivering an ultimatum.

"You can't do as missy class president does. I don't mean just you–not me, not anyone. No one can do as she does. You need to understand that right now."

Plop, Oshino put his hand on my shoulder again and continued.

"Sure, maybe you're supposed to lend a hand to a friend in need. But Araragi, only a precious, select few can rise to the level of doing things you're supposed to the way you're supposed to. It's not something an average person like you or a mediocrity like me can do.

I understand how you want to emulate her and do this because you revere her and want to repay her–but that's *something you shouldn't do.*"

"Something–I shouldn't do."

"Forbidden games," Oshino said. "You see, that girl is more of an aberration than aberrations. She's more of a monster than monsters. You're in for a bad time if you thoughtlessly try to imitate her."

"Imitate… That's not what I'm saying–"

"*It's what I am saying.* So much for your idealism."

Oshino moved his hand from my shoulder to the top of my head.

Almost like.

An adult comforting a child.

"In reality, it's already begun," he stated. "You need to leave the rest up to a pro. This isn't an act that any amateurs should be making an appearance in, let alone a minor."

"……"

"Araragi, I realize you might be feeling some sense of responsibility for whatever reason. If only I'd stopped missy class prez from burying that cat, or if only I'd talked to her more, or something like that. Nah, I don't think that makes you responsible for a thing, though I wouldn't say there's nothing for you to be regretful or remorseful about, either. But you have to understand–even if you're responsible for a situation, that doesn't mean you have to be the one to resolve it."

"What?"

"As a neutral party and a balancer, I respect where responsibility should lie, but human society, or the world for that matter, doesn't always work that way. You shouldn't take everything I say to be right.

Things have a surprising way of working themselves out even when whoever's responsible for them abandons that responsibility. I'm generalizing, of course."

It's not like you absolutely have to hustle. That kind of obligation–doesn't exist, Oshino said dispassionately.

"When you became a vampire over spring break, you did hustle–but who knows, it might have all worked out even if you'd spent the whole time hiding out here not doing much at all."

"Th…"

I–couldn't accept what Oshino was saying.

"That–can't be true. And even if it were–I still had to. This time, too–"

"It's something you have to do? Maybe. But you can't."

"…"

"You can't do a thing this time, Araragi," Oshino said with force, with emphasis. "I might not look it given how easygoing I am, but I really do feel bad about letting you get mauled. Though I thought we were still at the prevention stage, I shouldn't have asked for your help. I failed as a balancer. I ignored theory and contradicted policy. The damage you took was in large part due to my oversight. I feel like I need to apologize to your parents."

You've done more than enough with this–Oshino didn't particularly sound like he was trying to comfort me, nor did he seem all that serious, and if anything, he was amused by my blatant helplessness, but his tone grew stern at the end.

"Koyomi Araragi. From here on out–there isn't a thing you can do. There's nothing you can do for missy class president. Not even if you want to. This isn't a question of feelings, it's a question of

technique, of ability. If I must–you've the important task of staying out of my way."

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There was no meaningful, or even meaningless rebuttal I could mount against Oshino's curt and brutally honest dismissal, so I left the abandoned building behind, dejected.

Of course that's how it was.

I'd *only* become a vampire for two weeks, regardless of what kind of hell those two weeks felt like for me–and all I had now were some lingering physical aftereffects from that time. There wasn't going to be anything I could do.

I truly had nothing to say in my own defense.

I was no expert, nor any kind of professional–everything from here on out was Mèmè Oshino's exclusive domain.

I was just a friend.

What was there–that I could do?

…No, that was more rationalization.

Excuses.

I was just trying to act cool.

Shamefully enough, I was just trying to act cool.

The reality of it was much more simple–what was important was Tsubasa Hanekawa, herself, and she didn't want the help of someone like me.

It wasn't Oshino.

Oshino hadn't dismissed me–Hanekawa had.

That's what she'd done then–refused my support.

Stay out of this.

Don’t act like you know.

She’d rejected me–stubbornly and sternly.

She’d left me no room for discussion or compromise.

So, like Oshino said, if there was something I could do–it was to stay out of his way.

Whether it was in terms of ability, spirit, or principle–I should be doing nothing now.

I needed to get out of there.

Even so, while my brain understood, despite feeling that I’d convinced myself, there was something vague still prickling my heart. Although I did leave the abandoned building, I found myself unable to head homeward.

I couldn’t set myself on that route–was in no mood to return to where my little sisters would be eagerly awaiting my arrival. In fact, I turned my handlebars in the exact opposite direction.

Without a moment’s delay–I started toward the spot where I’d encountered the Afflicting Cat.

To do what?

It wasn’t like I had anything in mind.

It’s not like I thought that if I went there, I’d meet the Afflicting Cat–Hanekawa–again.

I wasn’t planning for another encounter.

This wasn’t me crying over spilt milk–I just thought I’d finish playing the half-fulfilled role I’d been assigned.

In other words, I was going to find Hanekawa’s home.

Even I realized that it was pointless to do so now, but I still had to do it for whatever reason.

Maybe I was still confused.

Maybe I'd lost my composure after everything that had happened, from Hanekawa becoming the victim of an aberration to me seeing her in her underwear with cat ears.

At the very least, I wasn't so thoughtful that I was worrying if the door to Hanekawa's house was locked since it was probably empty after she'd disappeared into the dark night and her parents had been taken to the hospital.

I arrived in the residential area in no time at all, and once I began searching single-mindedly, I found her house much sooner than I expected.

A nameplate that read Hanekawa.

There were two given names under it, probably her parents, and a bit removed from those–a bit removed was "Tsubasa," making it exceedingly unlikely this was another family with the same surname.

A completely average ready-built home.

That's how it appeared.

At least, there wasn't anything you could call a sign–of domestic violence having been committed in this two-story home, of child neglect having taken place. But the fact that "Tsubasa" was written in phonetic characters as if they referred to a little girl oozed a faint sense of something being off.

How long had it been?

When was the last time this nameplate had been changed?

Hadn't they remade it as their daughter grew up?

Was it too annoying to take off?

It made me think.

It made me think unnecessary thoughts.

It made me think irritating thoughts.

Even though there was no point in me thinking.

Even though there was nothing I could do.

I opened the gate door and headed toward the entrance like something was guiding me–but the front door was actually locked when I pulled the doorknob.

"……?"

I wondered.

That Afflicting Cat who called Hanekawa her master–if I may, she didn't seem very smart.

In fact, she didn't seem to come with a shred of intelligence.

Even a beast might be cleverer. You could say it didn't possess the slightest fragment of wisdom.

So I was doubtful she could operate a cultural element unique to humanity like the lock–but she needn't have exited through the front door.

If anything, it was more natural for a cat to go in and out through a window.

I backed away from the entrance and circled around looking for an open window. Every one of them, however, was shut tight–even the shutters were closed.

What's going on, I tilted my head–when I noticed the secondfloor windows.

Right, that jumping ability of hers, so powerful it seemed like she could reach the moon.

Nothing said she had to exit from the first floor. With that in mind, I did another lap around the house, and I'd guessed right this time. I found an open window.

Hmm.

Hmmmm.

I couldn't back down now. The ship had already sailed.

Fortunately, my physical abilities were currently somewhat enhanced–while making it to the second floor with a single feline leap might be impossible, I could at least climb up the wall.

Once I made up my mind, I didn't hesitate–checking my surroundings, I started to climb.

I reached the window and–

"……?"

–And tilted my head.

I put my hand on the sill, brushed the curtain aside as it fluttered in the night breeze, looked inside, and tilted my head.

No.

I'd assumed the open window belonged to Hanekawa's room–by process of elimination, the Afflicting Cat must have jumped out of it after grabbing Hanekawa's parents by the nape. It was a reasonable conjecture. Not even recognizing that it was a conjecture, I just thought so.

But I was wrong.

If I had to describe the room, it looked like a study or something.

Was it Hanekawa's father's room?

I wasn't sure.

I hadn’t even heard what kind of work her father did in the first place.

But whatever the case, it looked like it couldn’t be anything but a workspace. It couldn’t be a high-school girl’s room, at least.

“Hmm.”

Still stuck on the wall like Spiderman, I dexterously (if I do say so myself) took my shoes off and invaded Hanekawa’s home.

This was trespassing by any definition, but I already looked quite suspicious stuck to the wall. My ship had sailed–though I was just a stowaway.

But.

There was a possibility that I should have considered–the vessel I’d boarded could be a slave ship.

To put it another way: for no good reason, just going with the flow, I’d broken the law by trespassing–and what awaited me was divine punishment of the highest order.

Or of the lowest kind.

I, Koyomi Araragi, entered the Hanekawas’–the empty Hanekawa residence, and with my shoes in one hand, did a quick lap through the house–then a second lap, a third lap, a fourth lap–

“——nkk!”

I took off running.

I could have exited out of the front door, but even that thought didn’t occur to me. I dashed to the open window in the study-like room and, as if I could rewind time by doing what I’d just done in reverse, dove out of it.

I fell, of course.

Directly onto the asphalt, with no attempt to break my fall–I worried that my left arm might pop off again after all that work to reattach it, but I didn't care about the pain in spite of my hard landing.

Fear had all but entirely consumed my mind. I ran without a moment's delay on all fours to my mountain bike and left the scene so fast I wondered if I was going to wear out its chain.

I left Hanekawa's house.

Like there was something revolting.

Like there was something evil about it–no.

I was just disgusted–I nearly wanted to vomit.

I couldn't but regret my needless visit.

I don't know what path I took, nor how many roundabout detours, but I was home before I knew it–and coming home hadn't even been my plan.

All I wanted to do.

Was run away.

I'd come home–as if by instinct.

"Oh. Koyomi. Wel–"

Whatever she'd been up to, Tsukihi was standing right there when I opened the door–given her bare outfit, nothing but a thin T-shirt over her underwear, she must have gotten out of the bath or something–and while she noticed me, I walked into the hallway with my shoes still on before she could say '–come home' and hugged her tight.

Tight, tight, tight.

“Whoa! Where’d this passionate hug come from? What’s your problem, you creep of a brother?!”

“……nkk.”

Tsukihi was visibly appalled and shocked by her brother’s eccentric behavior, but I couldn’t help myself.

And I wasn’t doing it because it was Tsukihi.

It could have been Karen, it could have been anyone–I think I just needed to hug the first person I saw.

I had to–cling onto someone.

I had to–embrace someone.

I felt like I was going to crumble if I didn’t.

My mind falling to pieces.

I was the proverbial drowning man grasping at straws.

Indeed, Tsukihi must have felt firsthand the helpless way my body trembled and shook.

I was afraid.

Call me chicken, call me whatever you want.

What was wrong with being afraid in the face of terror?

What was wrong–with shaking and freezing?

Such–was the intense impact of that home.

A single house.

In terms of size, it might have been bigger than the one I lived in.

There’d been six rooms.

And yet–that house.

The Hanekawa residence had no room for Tsubasa Hanekawa–

"Urrrrrrrrr."

Scary. Scary. Scary.

I couldn't even begin to compare spring break to this–my hellish memories were going to be rewritten as something pastoral, those two weeks painted over as nothing worth mentioning–that's how scared I was.

There was no room for her.

And–there was no *trace* of her.

While she may have been passed around as a baby, she'd lived in that house for almost fifteen years–but I couldn't find any signs of her no matter how much I prowled through it.

Every house has its own smell.

The longer it's lived in, the stronger–but there was no scent of Hanekawa there–Tsubasa Hanekawa was so severed from the place that I had to wonder if it was the right house.

No.

Of course–given the school uniform hanging on the dining-room wall, the textbooks and study guides lining one library-like room, the underwear in the bathroom drawers, the futon folded in the hallway, the cell-phone charger plugged into the outlet by the stairs, the school bag placed to the side of the entrance–Hanekawa had to be living in that house.

No, really.

But–it almost seemed like she was living out of a hotel.

Not even a freeloader.

I hadn't taken things seriously enough–even so I'd been optimistic.

She'd shown me her face after her father's beating, and yet some part of me still believed: Hanekawa's okay, this is Hanekawa we're talking about, she'll be okay, of course Hanekawa's okay, how could she not be okay?

Even after she'd been possessed by the Afflicting Cat.

She was okay? How stupid could I be?

"Urrrrrrrr."

It was too late now.

It was too late for Hanekawa.

That?

You couldn't come back from that–it was irreparable.

To describe it in a word, it was insane.

It was crazed, it was mad.

If I left the matter in Oshino's hands, Hanekawa would end up in his care soon enough, and the Afflicting Cat would be exorcised by that jerk in a Hawaiian shirt without incident–but there was no happy ending waiting for us where she reconciled with her distant parents and put all those years of discord behind them.

How could it ever end?

How could it become even more finished than that?

That house.

That family.

That home.

It was so over for them–that things couldn't be any more over.

“Urrrrrrr–aaaagh!”

“…Oh, Koyomi. I don’t know what to do with you sometimes. Was it so scary? You’re okay now.”

My shaking only got worse as I let out what was nearly a shriek, but Tsukihi, my little sister by four years, caressed my head to calm me down, a gentle smile on her face that showed she really meant what she said.

Then closing her eyes and softly puckering her lips, she offered, “Go ahead. I don’t mind.”

“GROSS!”

I shoved away my little sister.

Violently.

“Yeek! Is this how you repay your little sister’s devotion to you?!”

“That was educational guidance! Can’t you two ever live outside of the moment?!”

“What do you expect? I have you for a big brother!”

“Guh!”

That was hard to argue with. No one was more focused on the moment and the moment alone than me.

I did feel like I used my brain a little more than her, though–she didn’t just live like she was guided entirely by spinal reflexes, she was like a spineless single-celled organism. That wasn’t me.

I didn’t think it was, at least.

In any case, my sister’s creepy act of devotion made my body stop shaking for the time being.

That’s what family is for–I guess you could say?

Family.

Family, huh?

The word naturally brought to mind Hanekawa's father and mother, who must have been in a hospital at that moment. It made me feel somehow melancholic. There was really no reason at all for me to sympathize with them, but I still thought–

What does it mean to live in that house for almost fifteen years?

It can't have been a happy home for them to be in, either…

"But you know, you made me worry," Tsukihi said. She must have meant to wear the yukata under her arm once she'd gotten to the second floor, but instead, she'd thrown it on right there. "We waited and waited, but you wouldn't come home."

"Hm?"

I finally shut the wide-open door. I took off my shoes, too.

"Okay, I admit I shouldn't have spent the night out without telling anyone, but why worry about me at this late date?"

"True–considering that journey of self-discovery you went on during spring break."

"……"

Right. As far as the Araragi household knew, that's what happened over spring break.

That wasn't getting corrected.

My little sisters still referred to me as "the self-discoverer" every once in a while, but I just had to take it in stride.

"Still, Karen and I were worried that you might've run into a ghost or something."

“A ghost?” My heart skipped a beat when I heard her nail exactly what had happened–but I calmed myself and brushed off her remark. “A ghost… You gotta be kidding me. You two are in middle school and you still believe in that kind of stuff?”

“Mmm.”

I tried to sound like I was making fun of her, but Tsukihi’s reaction didn’t give me the most confidence. She looked pensive as she put a finger to her petite chin.

“Not a ghost, exactly, but a Changing Cat,” she said. “A *Bakeneko.*”

“A Changing–Cat?” I repeated her words.

All I could do was repeat after her like an idiot.

A Changing Cat?

“Yup,” she confirmed.

She didn’t look like she was joking–in fact, she looked downright serious.

She looked righteous.

It was the face of the brains of the Fire Sisters, who purported to be justice itself.

“It’s only a rumor for now, so I can’t say anything for sure–but we’re hearing there’s a *cat ghost in human form* that’s going around town attacking people.”

“……nkk.”

A cat ghost in human form.

How could so vague a phrase also be precise and even technical?

It was so ambiguous.

And it was so accurate.

“What do you mean–attacking people?”

“Yeah. So we don’t know for sure–but it sounds like if it *touches* you, you get really tired or weak all of a sudden–and actually faint.”

It felt like a fuzzy, roundabout explanation–*but to someone who already knew the answer,* it was obvious.

Energy drain.

“So–when did this start?” I asked.

“Hm?”

“You know–when did people first start getting attacked by this Changing Cat?”

“No clue. We haven’t heard any details yet–we’re still investigating the case, but I first heard about the rumors this afternoon. That’s why we started worrying about you, and that’s why I started calling you like crazy.”

“……”

My little sister had some good intuition.

Of course, she was also off the mark and far too late–already attacked by the Changing Cat by then, I’d been passed out as passed out could be.

But–oh.

So that’s what happened.

After the Afflicting Cat had given me Hanekawa’s parents last night–she started attacking people in town.

Hanekawa’s parents and I–weren’t its only victims.

Now it made sense.

Oshino had seemed oddly proactive–as a balancer and a neutral party, he wouldn't have been so assertive about this job if Hanekawa were the only victim.

It was because there were others, too.

No.

It was because Hanekawa, possessed by the Afflicting Cat, had become a perp–that the specialist made his move.

But I didn't understand.

Why would the Afflicting Cat–*attack people*?

Something strange was afoot given that a nocturnal aberration was prowling in the middle of the day–but didn't Oshino say the Afflicting Cat didn't actively harm humans?

…No.

The Afflicting Cat might not think of its behavior as attacking–in most cases, aberrations didn't care one way or another about humans.

Vampires, who saw humans as sources of nutrition, as tanks full of blood, were actually on the better side of things as far as that went. Most aberrations didn't see any value in human existence.

Just as it didn't matter for humans whether aberrations were there or not–in almost every case.

So if the Afflicting Cat was unwittingly draining people's energy and not biting them or tearing off their limbs as it had done to me–calling that "attacking" was nothing more than a self-centered human interpretation.

In addition, perhaps some misguided scamp or whoever else on the street had seen a girl with cat ears in her underwear and gotten in her way when they shouldn't have.

The victims may have just been targets of a counterattack.

I, for one, wouldn't leave such a catchy character alone–but I digress.

Actually.

This was becoming a full-fledged incident, wasn't it?

Tsukihi continued, "I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw you weren't harmed, but the Fire Sisters, the avatars of justice, can't allow this to go unanswered! Karen's getting ready to go hunt this Changing Cat, too!"

"…No."

What could I say?

Was ghostbusting in the Fire Sisters' job description? Is that what defenders of justice did?

What kind of underworld detectives were they?

Most of the time, I let the Fire Sisters off with a mild rebuke–but this was getting a little dangerous.

This wasn't some kind of middle school summer camp dare.

If they only ended up getting their energy drained, that was one thing, but if they were openly hostile to the Afflicting Cat–who knows, they could even get their arms torn off like me.

And that would mean instant death for Tsukihi or Karen, who weren't immortal like me.

Karen packed a decent punch, but we wouldn't be having this trouble if karate could defeat an aberration.

What was she, Nyanko-sensei? Or was that judo?

Then again, my sisters weren't the type to let anyone stop them–they were so reckless that the harder you tried to, the faster they'd charge in.

It only took a spark to set them ablaze.

The Fire Sisters.

"Hm? What's the matter, Koyomi? What do you mean, 'no'?"

"I was thinking oh no, I don't know what to do."

Tsukihi was looking at me dubiously, so I took a deep sigh in my mind and began my unwilling, reluctant speech. My tone was as flat as could be.

"You saw how scared I was just biking back home at night. But now that you told me that scary ghost story about the Changing Cat, I'm completely shaken. How's a chicken like me supposed to go to bed on his own now? I was hoping you and Karen could sleep by my side for a while tonight, but I guess I'll just have to give up if you need to go out there and fight for justice. You two were my only hope, though."

"What? We're your only hope?"

She bit.

My stupid little sister bit.

"I guess we don't have a choice, then! Oh, my poor little scaredy-cat of a big brother! I'll go talk to Karen, and we can let the police take care of the Changing Cat!"

"…Thank you."

My littlest sister was powerless against her brother relying on her.

Well.

As you can see.

If there was anything I could do for Hanekawa, it was to stay out of Oshino’s way and to sleep in the same bed as my little sisters.

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I can't deny that I still had my concerns, though. The Afflicting Cat's energy drain didn't seem like a lethal skill, but it wasn't hard to imagine the ability putting someone's life at risk if she overdid it–and there was also that sheer power, capable of ripping off a human arm with a simple bite.

Her speed and jumping prowess were far beyond anything known to man, too.

In other words–there could be casualties if the situation wasn't resolved soon.

We'd have victims, and we'd have fatalities.

Someone could die.

There was a chance that Hanekawa might kill.

I'd managed to keep my little sisters in check by nobly offering up my body but couldn't stop the police or citizens who might decide to "help out"–what high schooler had that kind of power? The risk would only grow as more people tried to exorcize or hunt or even just catch a glimpse of the Changing Cat.

I'm not saying just feeling weak or passing out was okay.

But death–that we couldn't have.

Because if you took away the supernatural phenomenon, the aberration–

Tsubasa Hanekawa would end up a murderer.

A regular–murderer.

…No, thank you.

How could such a thing come to pass?

What kind of bad joke was that?

Tsukihi may have been more tuned-in to rumors than the average person due to her being the brains of her operation, but a single day was all it took for her to learn of the existence of the Afflicting Cat–it was hard to imagine these being covert attacks.

Actually, the aberration probably wasn't thinking at all.

Given how she was walking around in her underwear–I doubted she had in mind Hanekawa's everyday life after this.

After this.

After this?

Hold on, after what?

After what action? After what situation?

The Afflicting Cat may have been draining energy from everything in sight–but I didn't know her goal.

Maybe I'd have had a better idea if I'd asked Oshino in detail about the kind of aberration an Afflicting Cat was–but no, there was no need for me to know, was there.

I couldn't annoy Oshino over something like that.

I shouldn't get in his way.

It would be okay. As frivolous, flippant, and superficial as he was–he was also a pro.

He'd solve this in no time.

No time at all–before Hanekawa accidentally killed someone.

If I wanted to know the details, I could just ask after everything was over.

Either Oshino–or Hanekawa.

I could just ask.

But could I, really?

Did I have any right to know?

And wait, did I even want to know?

The same person who trespassed into Hanekawa's house and learned about what was really happening there–and who lost all self-control?

Would I be able to step inside Hanekawa's mind, inside her heart–barge into her private life and leave muddy tracks behind–and continue to be her friend?

I didn't know.

Maybe there really were things in the world that you're better off not knowing.

I'm not sure if the comparison is an apt one for my situation, but I think a lot of people have admired some great person–some revered historical figure you love so much that you start digging through biographies to learn more–only to be confronted with equally great scandals and disgraces and feeling betrayed in some way. But isn't it pretty selfish to feel let down after all that?

You selfishly decided to love them and selfishly decided to hate them.

You selfishly put store in them and were selfishly disappointed by them.

You selfishly felt enchanted and selfishly felt disillusioned.

If that's the case.

Maybe you didn't need to know–from the start.

Earlier.

Maybe I shouldn't have gotten so involved in Hanekawa's business–after all.

I could have brushed off the gauze on her face–but still.

That was like cherry-picking the good parts.

I'd only wanted to love her, put store in her, and be enchanted by her, nothing more.

She'd done so much to save me over spring break–and yet I didn't know what to think. All I could do was agonize.

My mind was just going in circles. If there was anything I knew for sure, it was that I had spent a month-plus with Tsubasa Hanekawa since spring break without learning the first thing about her.

And I'd talked about being in love with her? Ridiculous.

I could only laugh.

I could only be laughed at.

My conversation with Tsukihi felt all the more embarrassing now.

What I'd said wasn't off the mark, it was out of the question.

But even then–whenever I thought about Hanekawa, I felt like my heart might burst.

All these thoughts ran through my head as I lay next to my sisters like a kid, like a doll.

I really must have been tired. I'd slept all afternoon, but it took no time at all for me to fall asleep that same night.

And so April thirtieth came to an end and May first began–though it was Golden Week, May Day wasn't a holiday at my private high school.

May first and second were weekdays.

Monday and Tuesday.

I had to go to school.

It seemed to take less time and effort than usual for Karen and Tsukihi to quickly rouse me since they were sleeping in my bed too–and I got on the granny bike I took to school and headed off.

When I arrived at my classroom just before the start of school, Hanekawa really wasn't there, as obvious as it was.

She was absent.

The perfect attendance record held by Tsubasa Hanekawa, the model student with zero tardies, absences, or early dismissals, had come to an unceremonious end.

Even if that weren't the case, when a student as high-profile as her was absent without notice (Who was going to give notice when her parents were unconscious and hospitalized?), it wasn't like when a washout like me decided to play hooky on a whim. Our teacher looked concerned and asked during homeroom if anyone knew what might have happened to her. Of course, no one offered any information. All the question did was stir up chatter.

Naturally, I didn't say anything, either–some of my classmates may have been curious enough, which is to say sharp-eyed or keen-eared enough, to have known the rumors about the Changing Cat, but tying them directly to Hanekawa was a tall order.

If you saw that Afflicting Cat.

You wouldn't think it was Hanekawa–unless you were me.

No, maybe even I wouldn't, at that point.

Because I was practically wishing that my eyes had played a trick on me, or that something else had.

By the way, there was something striking about this girl in the corner of our now-noisy classroom called Senjogahara who just sat there and listened to our homeroom teacher's appeals with an oddly bored look on her face.

Perhaps there was a better word than "bored"–it was an expressionless look that seemed to say, "Yep, I knew it. That's the kind of girl she is," as if Senjogahara were seeing through the disguise of another of her ilk–but anyway.

Hanekawa didn't come to school on May first or second.

Around the time classes on the second were about to end, the rumors of the Changing Cat had started to spread through school–including stories from a number of eyewitnesses–making it clear just how busy the Afflicting Cat had been.

It had only taken three days.

Unfortunately for our peaceful, uneventful town in the middle of nowhere, this Changing Cat scare was now more than a rumor spreading among schoolgirls, unlike the vampire brouhaha over spring break–looking at how things were going, there really was the risk of a Changing Cat hunt starting up.

I couldn't hold even the Fire Sisters back forever–and if those two made a move, it was as good as every middle schooler in town making a move. I wanted to keep them under control for as long as I could, but I only had so much authority over them. Well, I say authority, but there was also the issue of how much more I could take emotionally in the humiliating position of being treated like a little boy by my little sisters.

In any case.

I decided to visit the abandoned building Oshino lived in one more time before the next day, May third, when our long break

would resume–it's not like I felt some stubborn need to help or had some kind of question to ask, though.

I didn't even want a status update.

It was something else entirely–I was going to feed the girl vampire, as always.

Last time I'd done this was April twenty-ninth. I could have waited longer, but I needed to keep an even closer eye on my little sisters starting the next day when the long weekend began; my plan was to keep the girl vampire nourished ahead of schedule. I also had the amateurish thought that she might be hungry after "charging" me back up the other day.

I chose to go in the evening, somewhere in between day and night, again in order to stay out of Oshino's way as he worked–my aim was to show up at a time when he'd be out looking for the Afflicting Cat.

Not quite the witching hour.

But they speak of twilight in the same way.

However, during Golden Week my intuition continued to be awful.

My intuition sucked, and so did my luck.

I tried looking for the girl in the same fourth-floor classroom she'd been in the other day–but she wasn't there.

And Mèmè Oshino was.

And he wasn't just there.

He was there looking like a tattered, worn-out dishrag.

"O-Oshino!"

“Hm? Why, if it isn’t you, Araragi–you kept me waiting long enough.”

While I ran in a panic to Oshino’s side, he was cool and collected, treating me the same as ever. As though he’d only been lying down to stretch out as part of a calisthenics routine, he scratched his head and slowly, lazily began to rise from the floor.

And indeed, it was only his clothes, including his Hawaiian shirt, that were in tatters when I took a closer look. The same wasn’t true for his body. All I could see were a few scratches.

That didn’t mean I’d jumped to the wrong conclusion, though.

Mèmè Oshino.

Was clearly–and completely exhausted.

It was my first time seeing him so weakened since I’d met him during spring break, at least.

“I thought you might be coming soon–and I’d wanted to recover by then. But I’d used those precious miracle bandages on you the other day…”

“Oshino… What happened?” I asked, still confused after running to his side.

“What happened? Nothing special–I just lost, that’s all,” he replied in his usual aloof manner.

It didn’t sound like he was bluffing or trying to act tough.

He was acting like he was just stating the facts.

“Y-You lost? To what?”

“What else? The Afflicting Cat.”

Nearly three days had passed since the night of the thirtieth.

And in that period of time, they'd fought a full twenty times–and he'd lost a full twenty times.

So said Oshino, grinning.

Uh.

It wasn't anything to say grinning.

If he was trying to act tough, it wasn't working.

If anything, it was feeble.

"But that means–you lost every time."

"Every time. What a miserable record. Ha haa."

Oshino wobbled to his feet.

His legs were shaky as could be, and he looked ready to keel over.

"What's a guy like me supposed to do faced with a high school girl in her underwear? I was so distracted that you could barely say we fought."

"……"

I knew the line was self-deprecating and another sterling example of Oshino's frivolity–but I still couldn't believe it. In fact, it seemed more credible that he really was too charmed by a high school girl's underwear to fight.

I mean–Oshino, lose?

Oshino, who practically ate an iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire for breakfast? And twenty losses in a row–that was like a bad joke.

Like a bad dream.

Could he have gone easy on Hanekawa because he knew her–or been hesitant?

……

Neither sounded very Oshino.

He wasn't that soft of a man.

If anything, he struck me as the type to be all the more merciless to someone he knew. Speaking from personal experience.

"Sheesh," he griped, "she really *sucked* a lot out of me our twentieth time just now. It's a real pain when a regular scratch can turn fatal–I can't believe she'd wring out a withered, tired middle-aged guy like me."

"Th-That's the kind of aberration the Afflicting Cat is?" I timidly asked Oshino, my body trembling. "Tough enough to overpower even a specialist like–"

"No, it's not," he replied at once with a shake of his head as if my comments were way off the mark. "Like I mentioned the other day. It doesn't even approach the level of the vampire who attacked you–really, it's such a low-level aberration that just comparing the two seems disrespectful."

"Huh?"

Low-level?

What did he mean…low-level?

For a moment, I wondered if Oshino was saying that to ease my anxiety–but he wasn't the kind of man who tried to console you.

And yet.

A low-level aberration?

Really?

“Hold on–you did say there was a clear difference between vampires and Afflicting Cats, but you never said anything about them being low-level aberrations.”

“I simply chose not to. I didn’t explain that part because I thought you might offer to help if I did–as an expert, I consider Afflicting Cats a class of aberrations I could exorcise in my sleep. Actually¸ they’re down there with aberrations that even amateurs could take care of if they really put their heads together. No need for a specialist.”

“What? But–”

That wasn’t what he’d said.

It wasn’t anything like what he’d said earlier.

In that case, I began before Oshino stopped me with an *Of course.*

“That isn’t to say I went easy on her. I honestly tried–while it did get canceled out, I feel like I owe missy class president on account of spring break. I didn’t have any weird reservations about fighting her.”

But I lost, Oshino said.

It almost seemed like he wasn’t frustrated at all.

There was no air of failure about him.

But.

He must have felt frustrated–and probably thought he’d failed.

It wasn’t like we were close, we’d only known each other for a short time–but that much came across.

Mèmè Oshino.

A man who had pride–in his work.

“Afflicting Cats are small fry.”

Once again.

Oshino spoke as if to reaffirm his words.

“The Afflicting Cat is an aberration that was originally thought up to serve as the *Manekineko*’s antithesis–it’s almost a fun piece of folklore created by a play on words. As opposed to the Lucky Cat, which invites luck, you have the Afflicting Cat, which invites affliction–it plays dead on the road and haunts humans who take pity on it. The type of ghost that switches places with its victim. An aberration that hijacks your body. And then, like the god of poverty, it drags the owner of that body, its host, to the depths of misfortune. That’s the kind of ghost it is–you could even say it follows a template.”

“……”

An aberration that took advantage of a person’s conscience and compassion.

True, that was a common theme in ghost stories, a trite one–and also.

It was a phenomenon I’d experienced myself.

So it didn’t seem particularly new.

But.

“Yup–we’re talking about missy class prez.”

I thought I’d taken that into account, Oshino said.

“The impossibly unusual twist here is that it’s missy class president who was possessed this time around. Afflicting Cats are supposed to be small fry, but this one is just about the strongest of all aberrations–she might have even *pulled it up* beyond the level of a vampire, if we’re unlucky.”

"……"

"The problem isn't that they share the same body, it's that they share the same knowledge. The old, traditional aberration measures I use, my methods, my moves, they all bounce right off her and back at me. She somehow has the expertise that only an expert should have. That girl–knows everything."

"……"

"Who's ever heard of an aberration that attacks people using strategies and tactics?" lamented Oshino, like he was at wit's end. "I knew it going in, but she really is something special. Everything, even her M.O. in assaulting people–it's not something the aberration would do."

"Hold on a second. What do you mean, her M.O. in assaulting people? You're making it sound like Hanekawa's going out of her way to attack them."

"Well–I guess she is. The Afflicting Cat isn't supposed to be that kind of aberration–but, Araragi. It might not actually be such a bad thing that I'm struggling this much."

"Huh?"

"Well, to put it another way, this turn of events is proof that missy class prez is still in the Afflicting Cat. That's what I think. At the very least, this wouldn't be happening if she weren't there anymore because the Afflicting Cat already took over her entire mind and body. There's probably *quite a lot of her consciousness left* inside–which is why this cat is so tough. That info is the worst possible thing we could hear, but it should also give us hope."

"Why? What kind of hope is there in that?" I'd never even considered having to fight Hanekawa. What an unimaginable threat–where was the hope in that?

“Well, we’re done for if she gets completely taken over. We’d just have to kill her then.”

Just like that.

We’d just have to kill her–he said.

“We’re going to need to salvage missy class prez’s consciousness while it’s still there–if we don’t defeat the Changing Cat, then Tsubasa Hanekawa, your dear friend, is going to be lost to this world forever.”

010

Let me take the time here to give you an example–no, an explanation of the tale of the Afflicting Cat, an aberration that Oshino said was garden-variety.

A white cat lies dead on the street.

Whether it died of hunger or was kicked by a passerby, it is in any case on its side and completely still.

Judging by its torn tail, it's doubtful it led any sort of happy domesticated life with a caring human family.

Out of pity–a man traveling the street picks up the cat.

Touches it.

He buries it in another spot, and while he doesn't hold any kind of service, he does at least say a prayer.

Our virtuous man begins acting strangely that very night.

He's wild and ill-tempered, like a different person altogether.

He becomes violent.

There's an uproar as he begins to drink and attack others–and everyone around him, even friends and family, feel tired just being in his presence.

They tremble and say the cat cursed him.

He is even acting like a cat, they say.

We can't handle this ourselves, they resign themselves, and summon out of necessity an exorcist who tries to cleanse the man of the cat that has possessed him–

But here's the punch line.

Where the Afflicting Cat truly shines.

The garden-variety truth of this ghost story.

The virtuous man had never been possessed by any cat–

"I don't know if you'd call it an absurd ending or a surprise ending, but the story is supposed to have a bit of a moral. You know, the kind of preachy structure you see all the time in folktales. There's no such thing as a wholly virtuous man, and kindness, in the end, is only skin-deep. Everything has an opposite–where there is light, there is darkness; where there is white, there is black. The cat is nothing more than a trigger. The story isn't just about how cats are ungrateful–it's an episode meant to shine light on the reverse side of us all."

The reverse side of us all.

That's how Oshino explained it.

But why a cat then, I asked, to which he answered, "Because a cat's always going to come out of the bag," as if it was obvious. "Just look at missy class president. *The cat's out of the bag for her,* isn't it? It's because there's no such thing as someone who's entirely virtuous, who's always fair. In fact, trying to act like that all the time–only makes you more stressed out."

It sullies you.

Those were Oshino's words.

Blackness.

The class president's–Tsubasa Hanekawa's dark side.

"Even then, the cat is usually nothing more than a mask of sorts, so I have no idea what's going on. Missy class prez has nearly merged with the Afflicting Cat. If the cat ends up being the host and not her, I

guess you'd have to call it assimilation instead. What an assailant we're up against. Actually, it might be better to describe her as unassailable."

While the way Oshino spoke made it sound like he was only amusing himself by turning phrases on their head, indeed he was describing the severity of the situation.

Frivolously–flippantly.

"What I do know for sure is that it's going to be bad if we don't settle this right away. We still run the risk of ending up with that old punch line: missy class prez had never been possessed by any cat. We need to do something before the two fuse, or else–"

…I understood how serious the situation was.

And that it might be beyond Oshino.

Even then–there was nothing I could do.

It was a plain fact.

Not a thing.

I couldn't do anything for Hanekawa.

I knew about the dark side she had inside her–I was able to see the depths of that hell.

But I couldn't do anything.

Oshino ended up leaving immediately afterwards–he said he'd been waiting for me, but if he was being flippant about anything, that was it. In reality, he seemed to have only stopped by the building for a quick little break, for a quick resupply between battles with the cat–so I gave some of my blood to the vampire squatting on the second floor today for whatever reason before heading home.

The girl vampire's eyes.

They seemed to be looking down on me, just as I'd expected.

They barely looked at me at all.

Or so I felt–but that was probably because I was looking down on myself.

So, the next day–May third, Constitution Memorial Day.

I want to say it was the day the Japanese constitution went into effect, or maybe the day it was announced, but I'm not sure. Either way, it was a holiday.

No matter what the reason or name, I don't like special days.

Since I couldn't be happy like a kid, I just needed to act like a grown-up.

But on that day, May third, I couldn't bring myself to stay quietly at home. I decided to sneak out when my little sisters weren't looking.

I felt like I could put aside for now my fear of the Fire Sisters riding off to do battle with the Changing Cat.

That was because according to what Oshino had told me the day before–and according to the rumors that would come into the Fire Sisters' ears through the full use of their intelligence networks, the Afflicting Cat had indeed claimed many victims in the form of draining their energy, but the actual damage had shown itself to be minor.

It caused people to lose consciousness and faint, yes–but the symptoms weren't bad enough to require hospitalization.

To borrow a line from Vegeta toward the end of *Dragon Ball Z,* it only felt "like after you've run as hard as you can."

The only notable victims had been Hanekawa's parents, and me, who'd gotten an arm ripped off via a physical attack–which meant.

All she was doing–*was tiring them out.*

So that was one way she was different from a vampire–or no, she was probably controlling herself. She was making sure people weren't being too harmed when she drained their energy.

She was holding back despite the ability being constantly active–or precisely because it was.

If Oshino's assumption was right and she was intentionally attacking people–those same intentions were making her not kill them.

Hanekawa's consciousness still remained–

Maybe that's what it meant.

…But in that case, I wanted to know why the three of us had been so brutally harmed.

I could figure out why for Hanekawa's parents.

But me?

I decided to bring this line of thought to a beautiful little halt before it led me to any depressing truth.

Anyway–that's why I determined that the Fire Sisters could do anything they wanted in the afternoon; they probably wouldn't get into trouble unless it was night. I didn't have to worry about them dying. In fact, I almost wanted the Afflicting Cat to drain some of their excess energy–I'm joking, of course.

In any case.

I headed–to school.

Naoetsu Private High School.

The school I attended–but I didn't have anything in particular I needed to do there.

Actually, I had nothing at all to do there.

It was ridiculous for me to choose to go to school on a holiday when I tended to skip classes on regular days, but what was I supposed to do? I was already there.

Still, time-wise, I was impressively late.

The school's gates were open for the sake of any students who wanted to diligently apply themselves to their clubs, and its doors were unlocked, too. It was easy to infiltrate compared to Hanekawa's home–er, I guess that phrasing might give people the wrong idea. It's not like I have a trespassing hobby or something.

I just didn't know where else to go.

So I climbed the stairs toward my classroom.

That door was locked, at least–or so I thought, until the back door worked.

Come on. Talk about careless–or so I thought, until I realized that locking the classroom was my job as class vice president.

It must have slipped my mind because I always left everything up to Hanekawa, the president–sheesh.

Could I not so much as lock a door without Hanekawa around?

Now that was depressing.

…No, I wasn't the kind of person who normally felt depressed over such a thing.

I was the kind of person who didn't just forget to lock the door at home but left it wide open at times–though I did so knowing how safe our town was, of course.

In any case, I was lax when it came to that kind of thing, or rather, I was irresponsible.

And yet–at that moment, I found myself remorseful about having forgotten to lock the door.

What was it?

These days, it seemed like every little thing about me *started from Hanekawa*–I needed to pause and think just to remember the kind of principles that used to guide my actions before spring break, which was when I met her.

It felt like I'd been remade as a person.

I hadn't been just modified but rebuilt from the ground up–it was a scary thought to dwell on, actually, so why was I practically happy about it?

Strange.

"……"

The classroom was empty, of course.

I entered, passed behind the teacher's desk, and arrived at a seat–not mine, but Hanekawa's.

The seat Hanekawa usually sat in.

The seat I'd find my eyes looking for during class.

Well–it wasn't like I was going to understand how Hanekawa felt just by looking at the blackboard from her perspective.

I wasn't going to understand a thing.

I sighed and listlessly dangled down both of my arms and pressed my face against the desk.

I felt no less despondent.

It wasn't like I'd come to school as some sort of mental refresher, but now I was even more depressed.

The desk had been unoccupied for over four days, starting from the beginning of Golden Week–I wasn't going to find any traces of Hanekawa's warmth there.

Sure, I was only making a show of how listless and lethargic I felt, but I could imagine someone seeing me and thinking I had snuck into the empty classroom to rub my cheeks against Hanekawa's desk.

When you consider that this really was the desk that the well-endowed Miss Hanekawa always pressed her glorious chest against, I was being no better than a grade schooler licking his sweetheart's recorder.

Though I knew it would spell the end of my life in more ways than one if anyone saw me, I half-jokingly looked at her shiny new desk, (obviously) free of any graffiti or carvings, and stuck out my tongue for a little lick–

"……nkk!"

Someone had seen me.

Someone was staring at me.

From a bit of a distance, in fact from the exact seat that I normally used–a pair of eyes gazed at me.

Eyes.

Cat eyes.

"…Aren't you a purrvert with no maximum."

Though I had no idea when and how long she'd been there, looking at me and trembling for some reason in her black underwear was none other than–a white-haired cat.

No.

The Afflicting Cat.

“You scare me… You scare me more than any meowberration. You were just licking a girl’s desk and getting all excited about it…”

“N-No, that’s not what this is!”

That was what it was.

She was dead right.

I’d made an aberration afraid of me.

“A-And who cares about that? Where’d you come in from, and how–”

“‘Who cares’? What are you mewing about, human? What in this world’s bigger than you running your tongue all over my myaster’s desk?”

“I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about! Say whatever you want, I’m not admitting anything in court! So who cares about that! Where’d you come in from, and how?!”

“Mya-hahaha! What are you, stupid? Cats have the patent on sneaking around on our tippy-toes–so I got a good look at just how purrverted you are.”

“……”

Well.

It did seem pointless to ask an aberration questions like why and how…

Standing up from the desk–wasn’t something I felt like doing.

A sudden encounter.

A sudden encounter with the Afflicting Cat.

But–it was as though the way she entered the scene was too much for me, and I couldn’t adjust my emotions.

It didn't feel like a battle.

And–anyway, I knew I didn't stand a chance against the cat. Not just in a fight, but even in defending myself. All I could do was play it cool. If I were Oshino, then maybe–no, even Oshino was at a loss.

At the very least, the fact that the Afflicting Cat was here with me meant Oshino hadn't been able to produce results between the time I parted ways with him the night before and now.

So, over the course of that one night.

How many times had Oshino lost?

"Hrmm? Nyow what's going on here? You don't look very hostile–human."

"I know I wouldn't be able to lay a finger on you–cat. And it's not like you'll be taking my life, right?"

"We'll have to see about nyat."

The Afflicting Cat smiled.

With Hanekawa's face.

It smiled–in a way Hanekawa never would.

Still–this was Hanekawa.

Tsubasa Hanekawa's–dark side.

"My energy drain isn't a skill, it's part of my character, you nyoh–a part that says a flick of my fingers can afflict. It's nyot something I can control. I can go easy on someone, but it won't. I might nyot mean to kill someone, but it's completely possible."

"That's still better than you biting and scratching people the moment you see them. It'd be all over for them if you did," I remarked, making a show of shielding my left shoulder.

This was just a bluff.

I was putting up a front.

I was playing tough–so as not to show her my weakness.

“Hmph. So you’re a vampire,” the cat said. “But to take your bait, I’m nyormally supposed to be the type of aberration who can’t even put up a fight–thanks to my myaster, though, her strategy and tyactics, my existence now is powerful enough to crush even an expert and professional. I’m downright grateful.”

“……”

“I’m nyot the type of aberration who repays favors. In fact, I’m the type that dispenses malice in return–but just this one time, I’m so grateful that I don’t mind paying her back.”

The type of aberration who returned favors with malice–huh.

What a pleasant expression. But it was true.

I responded, “Yes, I’ve heard that cats have a surprisingly strong sense of loyalty. Like the Vampire Cat of Nabeshima–they say it turned into a yokai to avenge its master. They say that dogs become attached to humans while cats become attached to houses, but I’m a little doubtful.”

“You don’t nyoh-kai? Because of that yo-kai?”

Mya-hahaha, the Afflicting Cat laughed.

Hmm.

The Hanekawa I knew would never make a pun that lame.

She was the kind of person who’d lecture you over a bad joke.

Hanekawa’s reverse side, eh?

Her reverse side–her dark side.

“Of course, while we both have the ability to drain energy, Afflicting Cats and vampires are nothing like each other,” I said. I was just parroting Oshino, of course. “Vampires drain energy to feed–while Afflicting Cats drain energy to curse.”

“Hm. Well, yes.”

“The thing that I don’t get is why you’re attacking people for no reason. If we’re talking about types of aberrations, aren’t Afflicting Cats not supposed to attack people?”

“……”

The cat–fell silent.

It didn’t seem like she was going to give me an honest answer.

Actually, was it even a conversation if you weren’t going to answer questions that you didn’t want to answer or say things you didn’t want to say? It didn’t feel like there was any kind of communication going on. Our words got across to each other, but probably not their sense.

True, you could say the same thing about conversations between humans, but what I’d asked was the one thing I hoped to tease out of her–I didn’t want to waste our chance meeting here in this classroom.

…Hold on.

Was this a chance encounter?

It felt like meeting her in our classroom meant something completely different from meeting her near her home–

“Hey, cat. Are you–”

“It’s nyot like me to do this kinda thing,” the Afflicting Cat said, annoyed.

Her legs were crossed like she couldn’t be any more bothered.

This wasn't the time to be having such thoughts, but god, were Hanekawa's legs long.

I could see just how long they were now that she wasn't wearing a skirt. Her bare legs were visible all the way to the top.

Despite being shorter than me, she might've been the one with longer legs.

Oh, did I want to lick every inch of them.

Er, wait. No, that's not what I meant to say.

I wanted to stare at them like I was licking them clean.

…Is that a bad attempt at smoothing things over?

"You could say that I'm ignyoring the role I'm supposed to play as an Afflicting Cat right nyow–I've gone completely out of character. Well, I guess I'm still in character, but there's no meowstaking that it's irregular."

Of course, it's nyot me who's irregular.

It's my myaster–

Said the Afflicting Cat.

When I thought about it–Oshino had said something similar.

"It's–nyot like me."

"……"

"Mreh. Venting, that's all."

"Huh?"

"Why I'm attacking people. You wanted to know why I'm going around indiscriminately draining energy from everyone I see. So I told you–I'm just venting. Like a ding-dong ditch! Or putting graffiti on a wall! It's the same as that!"

In other words.

I did it because I was in a bad mood.

The only purrpose was to relieve stress–

The Afflicting Cat–disclosed this to me with a pained smile on her face.

What?

What did she just say?

"You're doing it to…relieve stress? That's… What? Wait…what do you mean?"

"All of it means purrcisely what you think it means–you peeked inside that house, didn't you?"

"Do you mean–"

"My myaster's house. You nyoh, don't you? And I nyoh, too–cats have pretty good nyoses. When I went back to the house to change, it was full of your scent."

Meow, you deviant little stalker–the cat said like she knew.

She'd gone back to change?

Oh, she had. She was still clad in black, but her underwear looked different from what she had on when we met on the twenty-ninth, or technically the thirtieth.

Just how addled was my brain?

How could I not notice? It was embarrassing.

Of course she wasn't going around for two or three days in the same underwear. Well, true, a cat would never think to change clothes–was this proof that quite a lot of Hanekawa's consciousness as a high school girl still remained?

Something like her Hanekawa-ness?

Now that I knew there was some of her left in the cat–I felt relieved.

Wanting to be careful about your personal appearance was–a very normal, girlish sentiment.

Sure, we were late–but we weren't too late.

We could still get Hanekawa back.

There was all of that consciousness left.

Hanekawa's unconsciousness.

…No, if we were considering worst-case scenarios, maybe Oshino had fought her the night before and been dealt a decisive loss–it was all over then–but that didn't seem to be the case when I saw how the cat was acting.

What was it?

Wait, no. That's what it was.

Of course.

Her underwear wasn't the only thing that had changed between the twenty-ninth and now.

The Afflicting Cat had felt nearly demonic, violent–more like a tiger than a cat, but the edge had come off–she seemed mellower.

……

She'd been relieved–of her stress?

"My myaster spent fifteen years in that house, that home–you can imyagine how crushed she must have felt by that pressure, that weight, can't you? How could you nyot tell how harassed she felt? And she's letting that out by playing pranks on upstyanding citizens.

Making herself feel better by causing trouble to random strangers. That's all this is–it's got nyothing to do with afflictions or curses or anything."

"Nothing to do with them…"

But that–wasn't like it?

Is that something an aberration would ever do?

Aberrations were always true to their character–they basically had to do the impossible to ignore who they were, just like with that vampire–

The impossible. An aberration immolating its nature–was all but impossible.

"I'll tell you one little thing–about those two," the cat offered. "Since I'm an aberration that possesses people, I've taken over my myaster's body–in nyother words, her brain. And that's why I share her knowledge."

That's what Oshino had said: it was so tough to deal with this aberration because it shared Hanekawa's knowledge. That's why we were in so much trouble.

"I nyoh–just how my myaster spent those fifteen years in that home."

"……"

She knew.

She only knew–what she knew.

"Of course, I only nyoh about it as nyowledge. I hardly nyoh how she felt. My myaster wasn't the type to keep a journal, either–maybe a diary over summer break for school, but they all ended with the same cookie-cutter line, 'I had fun today.'"

“She had–fun.” In that house? What could have been fun about it? “There’s–no way that’s true.”

“Nyope. That’s what I think too–for the most part, I’m only as smart as your average cat. That’s the kind of character I am–but even I could figure out that much. So–I decided to help get rid of my myaster’s stress.”

“But…if that’s the case, why is there any need for you to go around attacking random people–”

“Sorry. That’s the only way I nyoh how–”

It’s fun to be bad.

It’s fun to make trouble for total strangers.

“I’m nyot being rational, I’m nyot being irrational–but don’t you think I’ve calmed down a little bit, considering that I’m her inverted, indecent personyality? Compared to when I tore your arm off, at least?”

“Yes, I was thinking that.”

“Right? So my meowthods are effective!”

Which means you don’t have to worry, the cat said.

“I only need to attack anyother *five hundred people*–and my myaster will be stress-free. Then my role as an aberration will be fulfilled, I’ll have repaid her, and I’ll disappear–of course, like my intelligence, my habitat is the same as an average cat’s. Five hundred won’t be easy. But I should be able to take care of it all in anyother month or so.”

“…A month.”

“Yep. So tell that Hawaiian shirt guy to stay out of my way. I don’t understand what he’s trying to do, but he wants to save my myaster, right? Then he should just leave it to me!”

That–didn't seem to be Oshino's motive.

He wasn't thinking about how much he wanted to save her.

Even if you discounted the unique perspective he brought to things as a pro–he wasn't the kind of guy who believed that you could save another person.

People.

People just go and get saved on their own–that was his philosophy as a human being.

…But this cat probably wasn't smart enough to understand such an explanation.

We couldn't understand each other.

A human and an aberration–couldn't understand each other.

"You could say I'm an aberration who's a personality that meownifested itself out of my myaster's stress. A new breed, I'm different from the so-called textbook example of an Afflicting Cat–*no expert's moves will work on me.* None of his exorcisms, exhortations, or exculpations are going to do a thing. Tell him he's just dragging me down. All that pointless stuff he's doing is just wasting my time."

"So you want us to leave Hanekawa in your hands?" I asked, staying silent about Oshino's personality. "But why would you go that far? Aren't you like an evil spirit who possessed Hanekawa? Why actively do something for her sake?"

"How many times do I have to tell you? It's nyot like me, but I'm repaying her–"

The Afflicting Cat grinned–and stood.

Or rather, she moved from chair to desktop–on all fours, stretching her back as if she didn't care how she came across to me.

"–But you nyoh, that's all a lie."

And then.

Once she finished stretching, she continued, “I can’t quite ignyore the part of my character that says I’m an ungrateful cat. That’s just how aberrations are–like how a vampire has to suck blood. So I’m nyot doing this to repay her–because really, the only thing I have to be grateful to her for is this knowledge she gave me.”

“Huh?”

What was she saying?

It had been hit by a car and was dead on the street–and Hanekawa had buried it. And it had taken advantage of that compassion and kindness, which I thought was why–

“Nyope, that’s nyot it–true, those were her actions that day. I was stretched out on the road when my myaster picked me up, carried me to a spot with a wonderful view, and buried me. That’s all correct. It was exactly like you saw from her side–oh, and by the way, you’re nyot afflicted because you just stood by my myaster’s side and only helped dig a hole. You *didn’t lay a finger* on my dead body. I suppose it takes some courage to touch a carcass since you might get cursed or something, and in reality, you woulda been.”

“Oh… Well yeah, I do admit that I was scared. But that’s exactly why I think it’s so incredible that Hanekawa did it without seeming the least bit concerned–and look at how she got repaid, with a curse. Didn’t her kindness just backfire on her?”

“Nyo, that’s where you’re wrong.”

If I’d stopped Hanekawa then, even if I probably couldn’t have, none of this would have happened–or if I’d been the one to carry the cat’s corpse instead of being scared…

Hearing me say so regretfully, the cat responded, “*My myaster–didn’t feel any sympathy at all for me.*”

"__"

"*My myaster didn't feel the slightest bit sorry for me*–there wasn't a shred of kindness in her. As an aberration who works by taking advantage of such feelings, I can tell you that much for sure."

Meow.

The Afflicting Cat finished speaking with what sounded like an extra noise thrown in–maybe that was another one of its character traits.

Tacked on for the moé factor.

She was pretty adorable, though.

But the side of Hanekawa that the aberration exposed with that factor–the dark side of Hanekawa.

It was just so black.

Just so blemished.

Just so–grotesque.

"I was dead on the street, and my myaster held a service for me like it was a routine chore–nyot an emotion inside of her. Like she didn't pity me at all. So she didn't really have any openings for me to take nyadvantage of at all–"

"No, but Hanekawa–"

"My myaster's one wish is *to be a regular girl,*" the cat said. "It's her innermost wish–but my myaster's idea of normal is being ethical. My myaster wants to do the right thing. If you see a dead cat in the street, you bury it–nyow I do suppose that really is the right thing to do. A law, even. A formewla. My myaster followed that law and formewla–that's all."

"....."

The impact, of the cat's words, their weight–there was nothing I could say in reply.

No.

I couldn't reply in any case.

I'd known for all this time just how unusual Tsubasa Hanekawa was when it came to following rules and regulations to the letter–I knew about her values.

I knew about her ethics, and to be frank, there was something wrong with them.

The cat had used words like routine, chore, law, formula–but I would say *precept.*

An adherence to precepts born from a modest pride–she didn't want anyone thinking she'd strayed off the path due to her peculiar upbringing–however.

"No 'regular' person could stick to such precepts," I said. "Most people wouldn't think to bury a dead stray cat even if it's the right and beautiful thing to do. Well, they might think it–but they won't do it. People are too embarrassed even to give up their seat to an old person on the train."

At most, it was in service of pretending to be some defender of justice as with the Fire Sisters–the best you could do was play at it.

Even my little sisters would move on from their fun and games by the time they started high school.

Even them.

They'd become regular girls.

Something Hanekawa could never become–regular girls.

"Whether it's in terms of temperament or ability–you shouldn't be able to. But Hanekawa pulls it off."

“Yep. My myaster pulls it off–dispassionately. She can be purrfectly ethical without a thought in her head, like a myachine. That was unusual, and I say so as a cat who’s had a few funerals. *Hence–I felt like I wanted to save her.* In other words, this is all on a whim. Just like a real cat, right?”

The Afflicting Cat raised its left hand to pose like a Lucky Cat–as a joke.

“So you’d better tell him–that Hawaiian shirt guy–to ignore me. I’m only a cat playing pranks. Unless he wants to get charged with anyimal abuse–’cause I’m overlooking that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Isn’t it obvious? If I–well, if my myaster was really serious about hurting him, I coulda killed him the very furst time we met. *I’m going easy on him because my myaster knows him*–and you…well, you don’t look like you’re gonna do anything,” the cat said, hopping off the desk–she was only about two feet off the ground, but she managed to spin around before landing. “You’ve made the right mewve. If you care about my myaster, the right mewve is to do nothing–it’s not like you want to die, right?”

She turned her back to me and began walking toward the door with silent footsteps–they say the paw pads on a cat’s foot are what let them move around quietly, but it wasn’t as if Hanekawa’s soles had transformed into having any.

Or.

Was it–part of her character?

Her character–which transcended theory, reason, physics, and ethics.

This was a lot more than a puss in boots.

“Farewell. You nyoh…you do your best to have a good life, human.”

And with that.

The Afflicting Cat exited the classroom into the hallway–

“Wait!”

Until.

I stopped it without thinking.

Hm? the cat said, turning its neck and nothing else–literally a beauty looking back, like in a woodblock print.

No, her expression was a little too puzzled for that.

“If you’re saying your goal is to get rid of Hanekawa’s stress–it’s impossible.”

“Eh? Why’s that?”

“Well–Hanekawa’s parents are at the root of that stress, aren’t they? So even if you did manage to get rid of all her stress, it’ll just start building up again once she goes back home.”

Those two might be in the hospital now–but they wouldn’t be forever.

In time.

They were going to return–to that house with no place for their daughter.

“You can spend a month attacking five hundred strangers as stress relief, but she’ll eventually be right back where she started.”

“Hmm. Well, yeah. In that case.”

The shortsighted, shallow-minded cat took in what I’d pointed out, and then–spring break…

Exactly as the vampire had so often done–a gruesome smile appeared on her face.

"Then I'll have to hurt them so bad *with these* they nyever want to come back again."

And she–showed me the claws on her right hand.

They looked like they could kill.

Those five sharp claws looked like they could stab you to death.

"I'm gonna do more than drain their energy this time. I'm gonna answer domestic violence with domestic violence–if that's what my myaster wants."

"That…!"

Hanekawa–wouldn't want that!

I rose out of my chair so fast I nearly kicked it aside–before closing in on the Afflicting Cat.

No, before I tried to close in.

Just as I tried to grab her shoulder–I somehow made myself stop.

"Myep, that's the right thing to do. Just one flick and you'll be afflicted–that's why they call me the Afflicting Cat. Don't get close, don't touch! Nyot a finger. You shouldn't have anything to do with me–and probably with my myaster."

"Wait, cat, you–"

"Farewell. Go have a happy life," she bade once again.

And then the Afflicting Cat left, this time for real–she didn't even bother to look back.

"……"

I'd been left alone in the classroom.

I retreated back to Hanekawa's seat, put the chair I'd knocked over back on its legs, and sat in it again.

Then, just like I'd done before the cat showed up–I leaned all of my weight on the desk.

The Afflicting Cat hadn't even touched me.

But I was tired–drained.

"Ah…"

I muttered.

Weakly.

I made sure no one else was around–no, I probably would have muttered the same thing even if someone was.

I had to mutter it.

The sentiment just seemed to spill out of me.

"It's no good. I really–do love Hanekawa."

I had to put it into words.

I had to give it form.

"I love her so much I daren't even touch her."

Not a finger.

The most I could bring myself to do was rub my cheek against her desk like this.

It wasn't because of what happened over spring break.

It wasn't any gratitude I felt over being saved.

It wasn’t because she was pretty, and it definitely wasn’t out of pity.

It wasn’t like there was a reason.

I loved her.

Thinking I loved her.

Feeling I loved her.

I knew that I loved her.

“It’s just as Tsukihi said.”

And then.

I continued to mutter to myself.

Dispassionately, indeed–without thinking.

“I love her so much I can’t stand it–but these feelings aren’t romance.”

I continued to mutter–as I made a resolution.

I remade a resolution.

It had probably been set in stone from the beginning.

It was decided, unmoving–and I’d only now realized it.

My feelings for Hanekawa had gotten so out of control–

That they’d gone beyond romance.

The idea of spending my life with her seemed weak.

“I mean, I feel like I want to die for her.”

011

If you want to know how I spent the rest of my Golden Week, it was on my hands and knees the whole time.

From my chance encounter with the Afflicting Cat at school on May third to the last day of the long weekend, Sunday, May seventh, the present, I crawled around on the floor.

I put my heart and soul into prostrating myself.

Nearly five days, if you're counting. If you want that in hours, I wouldn't be able to give you an exact number, but around a hundred.

That was how long.

How long I spent prostrating myself, not eating, not drinking, skipping Saturday classes, sitting stock still, staying up, not raising my head a single time, like I was made of stone, like a carved statue.

Happens all the time.

It's nothing worth mentioning in particular, the kind of thing that everyone must go through once or twice in life, but that's how I spent the rest of my vacation.

I was sincerely praying that we wouldn't get some kind of assignment once we got back to class like "Write an essay about how you spent your Golden Week."

No, that wouldn't happen. I wasn't in grade school–and even if I knew we'd be given an assignment like that, I'm pretty sure I would have spent my Golden Week in the exact same way, in the exact same pose.

I'm very sorry to all of you out there who were led by my unflinching resolution in the empty classroom into expecting a magnificent battle between me and the Afflicting Cat, but unfortunately, I know my own limits.

I was aware of them.

I was very aware of them.

Even if, thanks to relieving all that stress by attacking people, the Afflicting Cat wasn't quite as ferocious as she was when we first met–a "human" like me still couldn't hope to fight against her. It was self-evident that I was no match.

How could I win?

Against someone even Oshino couldn't beat?

She would kill me, I would die, it would be over.

I wanted to die for Hanekawa–but that also meant I didn't want to die unless it was for her.

I wasn't going to die in vain.

I wasn't going to die like a dog.

If I had to say how I was going to die–I wanted to die like a cat.

And so, as Oshino and the Afflicting Cat went all around town attacking and saving people, constantly and ceaselessly engaging in *onmyoji*-style superpower battles, I was putting all of my body and soul into a full-speed-ahead *dogeza.*

If you're wondering who I was prostrating myself to.

That, again, isn't worth any special mention. Someone any boy will have bowed his head to by the time he's done with puberty, whether he was in my position or not. In other words, an eight-year-old girl.

An eight-year-old girl.

An iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire.

Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade–the husk and dregs of.

A blond ex-vampire girl.

So, to set the scene, I was on all fours in a very masculine way in front of a scowling little girl vampire who sat with her arms around her knees in a room on the fourth floor of the abandoned cram school.

……

If I may, I'm certain they won't show it in any anime adaptation.

What can I say?

Never had a scene more resolutely given up on any media franchising–but on that note, it does feel like everything has been out of the question ever since my little sister and I showed each other our underwear.

Like it would be one long, black title card.

"What in the world are you doing, Araragi?" Oshino actually asked me. "Listen, risking your life and not caring if you die are two different things–and here I thought you'd learned that over spring break."

There wasn't even a hint of the usual sarcastic or snide inflection in his voice. He wasn't even being frivolous or inconsiderate, his line just sounded normal.

But those were the only words he spoke to me over those five days–he returned to the building to heal himself every time he finished a fight with the Afflicting Cat (and when I consider that every time he was done resting he'd get ready for the next fight and head right out, he was probably spending all of that time doing nothing

but losing in his own way) yet clammed up once he figured out what I was trying to do. He never said a word, not even when he passed behind me.

The vampire was as silent as ever.

And I–was silent, too.

I maintained my silence–there was nothing I could say.

And I wasn't prostrating myself in order to beg, anyway–while I won't say my actions were fully free of such designs, I had my head to the floor as an apology.

I know it's late, but I'm sorry.

I'm sorry I'm asking you for help after all this time.

I was apologizing with all of my heart.

Really.

It was a truly shameless act–I couldn't blame Oshino for being dumbfounded. But I was ready to grind my face until it scraped off on the floor.

I knew.

I knew perfectly well–what I was doing.

How selfish it was.

How self-centered it was.

How self-satisfied it was–I knew.

Though Oshino was shocked silent, he never tried to stop me.

It could have been his values as a balancer. Or maybe a tiny part of him understood how I felt.

He may have even sympathized with me.

…No, I don’t think he did.

I was just going and getting saved on my own–and it wasn’t his duty, nor did he have the right, to stop me. That must have been all.

But, Oshino.

Understand this one thing.

I don’t require your sympathy, and I definitely don’t require your consent–but I just want to make sure you don’t misunderstand this one thing.

I wasn’t risking my life in the slightest–and close to no part of me didn’t care if I died.

I wasn’t able to sacrifice myself the way Hanekawa could–dying for a friend’s sake, the way the precepts she’d ground into herself dictated.

I purely–

I simply had a selfish desire in my heart to die for Hanekawa.

Call it frustration.

I wasn’t thinking about what I should do or what I needed to do–I just wanted to do it.

And then.

On May seventh, right after the sun had fully set, our fully frozen scene saw movement–suddenly and without any prior warning, the girl vampire who, like me, spent five days unmoving as if petrified as I prostrated myself before her, rose–and stepped on the back of my abject head with her bare foot.

Happens all the time, too.

If you live for long enough, anyone, either male or female, is bound to experience a little girl grinding her foot into your head. And if it hasn't happened to you yet, you just wait.

Getting stepped on by your little sister, getting stepped on by a cat, getting stepped on by a demon.

It's those kinds of experiences that life is all about.

Right as I noticed the girl vampire taking her foot off the back of my head, she used her momentum to soccer kick my face off the floor.

Unable to stay put, I flipped over, still in the same position–I learned what it was like to be a turtle on its back.

My back slammed against the floor.

And my posture, unbroken for five days–

The balance had been broken at last.

Shunted away by the little girl.

We're exploring the outer limits now, but yeah–happens all the time. Compared to something like the Big Bang, it definitely happens all the time.

But.

This–is where it happens none of the time.

Never. The first and last of its kind.

Not quite happening.

"……nkk."

I'd gotten up to go straight back to prostrating myself, undaunted, but what I saw was her standing straight, mouth wide open, looking like she was going to pull her own tongue out–and the

vampire drew a slithering katana out from the bottom of her throat almost like she was some kind of old-timey magician.

A long–katana.

Clearly longer than the vampire's present height.

A great katana, if you were to classify it.

I had seen this sword once before–just once during spring break.

Heartunderblade.

A heart–under the blade.

The one and only weapon she, the strongest, would wield, and the origin of her name–

The enchanted blade Kokorowatari.

Also known as the Aberration Slayer–a sword with no sheath.

It needed no sheath.

Why would a blade fated to cut down one aberration after another need to be contained by any such thing–

"!"

And then.

She took her blade, that proof of her identity not unlike a dogtag, the enchanted blade that was her irreplaceable memories given shape, and tossed it at my chest like a simple twig.

How was I supposed to receive it?

I bobbled it in my hands and just barely managed to hold on. I somehow didn't drop it.

I looked up, relieved–and the girl vampire was already back to her old posture.

Sitting with her arms around her knees, scowling.

……

I realized I'd missed my chance to see her expression when she was stepping on me or kicking me–naturally, since I was staring at the floor the whole time.

She wasn't donning any expression while she was expelling the enchanted blade, either–but well.

I had an idea.

Disdain, contempt, something like that.

Whatever.

No matter what it was–it wouldn't have been that gruesome smile she wore over spring break.

I could seem as comical and laughable as I wanted.

The girl vampire wasn't going to smile at me–especially not now.

Even so.

I faced her again–and deeply, apologetically–prostrated myself.

"You know, I've wanted to say this from the beginning," a voice spoke.

Like he'd been waiting for the moment–like he'd seen the moment coming.

A voice came from behind me.

It hadn't been long since the last time I heard it, but it was nice to hear it again.

I turned to find, you guessed it, Mèmè Oshino.

"Your dogeza style's all wrong, Araragi."

"Huh?"

“That’s more like a tea ceremony bow. It’s like you’re making the world’s most polite request or something–”

Ha haa, Oshino laughed cheerfully.

Though he laughed, his Hawaiian shirt was covered in scratches again–the worst I’d seen him yet. He was in such bad shape that he would’ve been better off fighting a hundred cats at once.

He shouldn’t have been laughing, if you ask me.

“Oh,” I said. “I was using a middle schooler in tea club for reference… I might’ve learned it wrong.”

“You’re making a tea-club middle schooler bow down to you? You’re into some messed-up stuff.”

“It wasn’t for fun. And anyway, I like being on the giving end more than the receiving end–these five days were pretty fulfilling.”

“Hmph. And now you got the enchanted blade Kokorowatari? That’s impressive–even I didn’t expect our li’l vampire to have a change of heart.”

I should congratulate you, he added.

There didn’t seem to be anything congratulatory about him, though. Not the tiniest bit.

But he probably wasn’t being mean-spirited, either–he was in a real tough spot himself from the looks of it.

Oshino’s professional opinion on what I was about to do had changed.

What I was trying to do–was no longer getting in his way.

Not at all.

“About missy class president’s parents,” Oshino began, as if it was nothing of importance. “They’re out of the hospital already.”

“–! Really?”

I was shocked.

I thought it would be a long while until they even regained consciousness after seeing how debilitated they were–but it wasn’t good news.

In other words–they were back already.

In that house with no room for Hanekawa.

What that meant in practice–was that if the Afflicting Cat went back to change and they ran into each other–

“So I went to go hear a bit of what those parents had to say.”

“Huh?”

“I visited them right before they were discharged. In between fights with the Afflicting Cat–I thought I might be able to obtain some sort of clue from them. I didn’t, though.”

“……”

So while I was prostrating myself in front of the girl vampire, he was off doing that, too? But no, when I thought about it, going to visit the Afflicting Cat’s first “victims” and speaking to them would be part of Oshino’s normal process, a standard procedure.

The idea just hadn’t occurred to me.

Hearing from Hanekawa’s parents–speaking to Hanekawa’s parents.

Unthinkable.

I didn’t want to hear what they had to say–and I didn’t want to see them, either.

"*They didn't know anything.* Parents who don't know a thing about their daughter–but I guess that's how things are these days? She is at a difficult age, after all."

"She has…a unique situation at home."

"I'd imagine. *I knew that*–but while I couldn't get any info out of them that would help me fight the Afflicting Cat, I did hear an interesting episode."

"An interesting episode?"

"Yes. They were probably in a daze when they told me, having just regained consciousness–they seemed to mistake me for a doctor."

It didn't matter what kind of daze you were in, no one would ever mistake this shabby geezer in a Hawaiian shirt for a doctor.

He must have played the part in order to create that impression.

"So what's this episode you heard?"

"A story of the time father dearest punched missy class prez in the face," Oshino said, still nonchalant, as if it really was an interesting story. "He lost his temper and punched her as hard as he could, with all the force of a grown man–hard enough for the frame of her glasses to cause a cut. It sounds like he sent her flying into the wall. She is a lightweight, after all."

"……"

He was giving me the details–but I didn't want them.

Especially not from the attacker's perspective.

I didn't even want to imagine it.

"So her body slammed against the wall, and she sat there crouching for a while in pain. But what do you think she did after that, Araragi?"

“What do I think she did? Well–”

“Missy class president had been punched by her father for no good reason, but all she did was crouch there. She didn’t even scream. What do you think she did next?”

I couldn’t answer.

Not because I didn’t know–but because Oshino’s expression, combined with what I knew about Tsubasa Hanekawa, told me all too well what happened next, gave away the punch line.

I could only–despair.

“*You shouldn’t do that, father,*” Oshino imitated Hanekawa’s tone–though he sounded nothing like her. “*You mustn’t punch girls in the face*–apparently, she said it with a smile.”

“……!”

I couldn’t bear to hear the words.

That?

Is that something a daughter says after being hit by her own father?!

Those words?

“Creepy, isn’t it–she’s so good it’s dreadful. How can you blame her father for only getting angrier and hitting her again? She’s such a saint that if she were born in ancient Japan, she could’ve been Himiko’s successor–honestly, even I would hit a kid like that. Scary. Scarier than an aberration. Creepy,” spat Oshino, his smile disappearing. “I think the stuff about her running her mouth about the work he took home was just the trigger. Even if she hadn’t, her father–and her mother–probably wanted to punch her for a long time now.”

“To punch her?”

Her father. Her mother.

Their daughter.

“She must have seemed a lot more like a monster than a daughter. It was as if a yokai had been dumped into their laps and they were told to raise it. There are a lot of ghost stories about someone’s child being replaced with an aberration, but she wasn’t even their child–”

“Really, Oshino?” I interrupted his speech. “Are you–taking their side?”

“I’m neutral, I don’t take sides. If anything, this all comes down to sides–missy class president is coming at it from her own side, and her parents have their side, too. There’s no way for a third party to know which one is right. No–there’s no being right to begin with. It’s not about right and wrong but what’s in their interest.”

There was no room for me to argue with him.

“This is a bit of a cliché, but when she threw her parents at you, she was throwing her conscience away with them. Not a particularly interesting observation–ha haa. I know you’re going to take missy class prez’s side, Araragi, you’re her friend. But her parents’ friends are going to take their side in the same way. There’s no being right to begin with.”

There’s no being right to begin with, Oshino repeated himself, insistent to the point of stubbornness.

There was no need for me to nod yes.

If anyone was right–he was.

He was right. There was no being right.

But–

“Still, Hanekawa… Hanekawa–is right.”

“And that’s why she’s so frighteningly creepy,” Oshino shot down the one argument I’d somehow managed to eke out. “I’m taking missy class prez’s side as I work on this case so that I can bring balance to the ecosystem–but I’m almost at the point where I think the best way to balance the ecosystem might be to let the Afflicting Cat take over her so she’s gone.”

“That’s…” I began, but wasn’t able to plead the case.

I wasn’t going to agree with him wholeheartedly–but had no basis to reject what he’d said.

I had nothing.

And if I had nothing, I couldn’t stick up for her.

But–Oshino.

It was that preposterous side of hers that saved me during spring break.

She saved me.

“That’s not to say there’s anything praiseworthy about missy class president’s parents, though–I could tell that much from our talk. It was clear they’ve abandoned their role as parents. But you see, Araragi, it’s not like I can’t understand why they feel that way. *Having to live under the same roof as someone as right as her*–and for that person to be your daughter–the thought makes me shudder. For ten-plus years, they existed in close proximity to someone too right for anyone’s good. The poor things. I’m sure what made them turn out that way was having to live with her.”

I recalled something.

The Hanekawas’ nameplate.

The given names of her parents–and a bit removed from those, “Tsubasa,” written in phonetic characters.

But.

In the beginning, at least–when everything was starting–they had enough of whatever it took to make that plate.

It was there, if only a little. The shape of…what would you call it…what a family should look like.

A daytime family drama before it was forgotten and ruined.

Whatever preceded the carcass that it turned into. It had to have been there.

Just as the person I now was started from Hanekawa–her parents must have started from her as well.

Living with Hanekawa.

Made them who they were now.

And in that case.

“She was always showing them what it meant to be absolutely right, there by their side. In other words–they were in hell, always being shown what was ugly and immature about themselves. It was a nightmare. I almost want to praise them for holding out and not hitting her for those ten-plus years.”

“But how is any of that Hanekawa’s fault?”

“It is her fault. She is the one and only person to be singled out here. Those with power ought to be aware of the effect that power has on their surroundings–I wouldn’t call this a case of black hens laying white eggs, but you do hear of parents who become broken people after they’re burdened with a wunderkind. Missy class prez was completely unaware of that. She convinced herself that she was

normal. She did everything she could to convince herself. She was trying too hard. And this is the result."

Affliction.

She'd brought affliction to those who would give her affection–in full, glorious view.

"She's even twisted the way an aberration, the Afflicting Cat, takes form–everything about this case is irregular. Everything is irregular, but she's what's irregular here. Even our li'l vampire helping you out, however minimal her help may be, owes to the fact that we're facing missy class president. This, that, the other, and everything else is all her fault."

"Sorry, Oshino. I know you're probably right, and I know it's wrong to tell you this–but don't say another bad word about Hanekawa, please." I'd finally reached my limit. "It's making me want to kill you."

"Is that sympathy for missy class prez I'm hearing? What regular people feel when they see a dead cat on the street?" persisted Oshino. He wasn't the kind of man who'd go silent just because I threatened him. He was a man–who talked a lot. "Are you sympathizing with her for her accursed birth, her accursed upbringing, and her accursed smarts?"

"No. Not even close. It's not like you to be so far off the mark, Oshino." I took the enchanted blade the girl vampire had lent me and rested its spine on my shoulder–doing my best to cut a figure. "You think I'd feel sympathy? I only feel one way about tragic girls. They're moé. All I want to do–is release some of my own frustration."

I almost felt like crying but struck a pose–at my most pretentious.

"I've just got the hots for a high schooler in her underwear with cat ears."

012

The enchanted blade Kokorowatari, the Aberration Slayer–a blade made to do precisely what its moniker suggests.

Aberrations alone.

A lethal weapon made to kill aberrations and nothing else.

If you look at it the other way around, it's a lethal weapon incapable of killing humans–no, not just humans. It can't rupture any living creature other than aberrations, can't fracture any implement other than aberrations.

It's a renowned and unparalleled sword against an aberration, but it's like a blunt blade against anything else, and some might even favor the blunt blade. The katana can't physically collide with anything other than an aberration, slipping by and passing through like a formless ghost.

Of course, the girl vampire's Kokorowatari possessed this trait because it was, strictly speaking, a replica, an imitation sword, the product of a wild fantasy created by vampiric, fantastic superpowers. As for the "real" Aberration Slayer, like Goemon Ishikawa's Zantetsuken, there seems to have been nothing that it couldn't cut, except konjac jelly.

Putting that aside.

If you want to know what this enchanted blade that killed aberrations and nothing else, sliced aberrations and nothing else, signified in this situation–it almost went without saying.

Using the Aberration Slayer would allow me to remove *only the Afflicting Cat* from Tsubasa Hanekawa–from the body and mind known as Tsubasa Hanekawa.

It would slice the cat and nothing else–sever it from her.

It could take the two sides of a coin, that dual personality of hers, and split it with a single stroke.

It could exorcise the Afflicting Cat on its own, leaving no wound whatsoever on Hanekawa's body–an impossible-mode feat that even an expert in the field, Mèmè Oshino, couldn't pull off, if you really want to hear me brag.

I alone could retaliate against the Afflicting Cat–against whom Oshino, the expert, had lost a total of a hundred fights over Golden Week.

I could do it.

It was a loaner, of course, and you can't really call it bragging when I had to grovel on all fours before a little girl to qualify for the loan–and anyway.

I didn't feel proud at all.

But.

I would be able to end this tale.

No arrangements required.

I could all but ignore any foreshadowing, twists, and turns, and place an indisputable period to this plot.

And–

That was enough.

"Well, it's not like I can use that enchanted blade, it's been customized for vampire use–you're just going to have to do this

thing. I like it. I think it's a nice idea," the expert gave his seal of approval.

With a certificate of authenticity on top–but that might be an overstatement if his mocking tone was any indication.

Even if the Aberration Slayer was customized for vampire use, it still felt like Oshino, an expert, might be able to wield it. But regardless–

He probably wouldn't do it.

Using such a *handy* item–a tool that brought results at no cost–was nothing short of heresy to him. It was foul play, a cheat code, a rules violation–it said to hell with balance.

"Yep, that's exactly right. So you do have some self-awareness. A lot better than not having any at all," Oshino remarked with a smirk. "But that's why even though, as an expert, I don't have anything left to say to you, as a friend–as your best friend, there's something I want to warn you about."

"Warn me? What?" I decided to ask, creeped out as I was by his cloyingly friendly and familiar words.

Oshino then held up three fingers and said, "Maybe it's not a warning, but you know how I like to complain. First off. Using that sword will allow you to separate missy class prez from the Afflicting Cat–it does seem at first glance the best way to give the Afflicting Cat its last rites. But it's her strategy and tactics and knowledge that made me lose all one hundred of our fights. I can't put a hand, leg, or tail on her because she's able to preempt my every attempt. And if it's that kind of Afflicting Cat you're up against, don't you think any kind of idea someone of your caliber comes up with would be one of the first things she thinks about and plans against?"

Oshino curled down a finger.

I wanted to say something about the “someone of your caliber” he’d snuck in there but decided to put it on the layaway shelf and answered, “Maybe… If we’re talking about possibilities, you’re absolutely right. But I’m confident about this–I’m sure it’ll go well. I can’t go so far as to say I’m certain, but I do have a plan up my sleeve.”

“A plan?”

“No–maybe not a plan. An expectation.”

In a way, it was wishful thinking–it’d be nice if things went a certain way.

I didn’t have any facts, but my opinion was good enough.

“…Hm. In that case, I guess I’ll trust you there. All right, then, if that’s good enough for you.”

“Stop making it sound like there’s some kind of deeper meaning in what you’re saying–so what are the other two warnings?”

“Oh–I’m taking back the second one. There was never any point in issuing it. Just let me share the third one.”

Oshino curled down his other two fingers together.

What’s with the last-minute indecisiveness–wasn’t the thought going through my head. I already had a good guess as to the second warning he wanted to give.

Yeah.

I know that, Oshino.

So if you aren’t going to say it–that does save me.

I know it’s not your intention to save me, of course.

Not now, not ever.

You’re not out to save me.

“Lastly, number three. This is the most important one, and I think it’s a practical one too, Araragi. It’s fine that you’re getting ready to go to war, and I’m not going to stop you–but realistically speaking, how are you going to find missy class prez when you don’t have any clue where in this town she’s hiding? While the results came out as straight losses, I could only fight her a hundred times over Golden Week because I’m an expert who’s learned how to track and discover aberrations–it’s because I’m able to understand what it considers its domain, its territory. And even then she shakes me off one time out of three. This is a hard case in part because we’re dealing with missy class prez, but it’s going to be even harder for an amateur like you. What are you planning on doing about that? How are you going to book this fight card? Don’t tell me your idea was to turn to me now and rely on me to do the tracking and discovering for you.”

“You sound so eager to help out, Oshino,” I said with a shrug. “Don’t worry. I have a real plan for that bit which isn’t just expectations or wishful thinking. I’m not making you go through any trouble for me. We should split up from here. You find the Afflicting Cat as an expert–and I’ll do it my own way.”

“Oh? Your–own way, Araragi?”

“Yeah. This is some more impossible-mode stuff that you can’t pull off.”

“Hmm. Then show me what you’ve got. Go ahead, I won’t stop you–I have no intention of getting in your way no matter how it turns out, bloodbath or bathos.”

And with that, Oshino made no attempt to inquire after the details of my plan. Some best friend he was–and then.

And then, thirty minutes after our conversation.

Exactly thirty minutes later.

I hadn't gone outside to find the Afflicting Cat as Oshino had–I was in the center of a small classroom on the second floor of the abandoned building, probably its smallest room, standing completely still.

I had already done everything I needed to do.

So now I just had to wait.

There wasn't much meaning in the location I had selected, I was just in the building because not only would the enchanted blade's effectiveness begin to fade if it got too far away from the girl vampire, so would its existence, breaking apart on a molecular level. I wouldn't have minded being in our school's classroom–well, I guess we couldn't be too conspicuous, though.

And anyway, the room seemed like a surprisingly good choice.

The window had been broken, maybe by a rock some kid threw or something, leaving only its frame–giving it a clear view of a beautiful moon that seemed cut out of the black sky, as if I was looking at a famous painter's masterpiece, a snapshot of the night–

"–!"

And right next to that masterpiece.

Right next to it, a body hurled itself straight through the concrete wall, piercing it like a bullet–and the Afflicting Cat appeared.

She paid no mind to the scattering debris.

She smashed through the steel beams–and with a deafening roar.

The cat effortlessly landed on all fours directly in front of me.

Even the floor she landed on began to crack. The impact, so powerful I wondered if it might destroy the entire building, made its way through the air to me.

We were in the twenty-first century, but there she was, showing up by crashing through a wall like she was Shampoo from *Ranma 1/2.*

Now that I think about it–didn't Shampoo turn into a cat if you splashed water on her? Meanwhile, Hanekawa had turned into a cat by spilling over. Similar in a way?

White hair.

A beast's ears growing from her head.

Black underwear–bare feet.

A cat-eyed–Afflicting Cat.

Her existence was enough to make me tremble.

And yet I stood there, still, as the Afflicting Cat's head shot up.

"Araragi! Are you okay?!" she called out, making no effort to hide her worry, so distressed she looked close to tears, ready to cling to me.

There was a ferocity to her, like she might pounce on me with the same force she used to smash through the wall–but she saw with her cat's eyes that I was standing there normally, in more or less perfect health.

"…Oh. I get it." She looked back down at the floor–and took her time standing up. "So–I got tricked."

"Uh huh."

That's right, I said.

What I had done was simple.

Apparently in China, hide-and-seek is called "elude the cat"–but unfortunately, I had no interest in hide-and-seek, tag, or any other games from that family.

If anything, I was playing kick the can.

On top of that, I was the can.

All I'd done was send a single text message–"*Save me, a vampire's going to kill me*" to Hanekawa's cell phone.

I hadn't written anything specific, making it a straightforward call for help that could be interpreted in whatever way you wanted–and that was enough for Hanekawa.

I was lucky enough to be a man with a cornucopia of causes for concern.

A fount of fret.

I knew that Hanekawa would go off and make full use of her knowledge and imagination to come up with all kinds of scenarios.

And–she would come for me.

That's what she always did.

During spring break, too.

That's how she came for me–as I was on the verge of death, as I was on the verge of being killed–as I was on the verge of killing myself.

You could even say that I'd recreated that situation–except the text was a total lie. I felt pretty awful about framing the girl vampire, but in terms of realism, she was the only one I could cast for the part.

I guess you could say it was a clever scheme. It was one that Oshino, who hated the idea of saving and being saved more than anything–and even if he didn't, couldn't use technology to save his life–would never employ.

If Hanekawa wasn't going to seek my help–I was just going to have to seek hers.

If there was any fault in my plan that would be fair for a third party to find, it would have to be whether Hanekawa, having become an Afflicting Cat, was reading her text messages or even carrying her cell phone–but I wasn't worried about that.

I mean.

High school girls–are possessed by their cell phones, aren't they?

If she was going back home to change her underwear–she was going to use the charger plugged into the wall, too.

……

If you're so inclined, just imagine that she was carrying it in between her breasts and enjoy that thought.

"Heh–I do have to say, Afflicting Cat. You got here fast. I'm impressed, it only took you thirty minutes to make your appearance. You really are something else."

"You're the worst, Araragi."

The Afflicting Cat's eyes swayed–and landed on me.

With a glare.

"You lied, you made me worry–you know you shouldn't do that."

"Kakhak!"

In the face of those words–I laughed.

Like a villain.

Like Asuraman.

I couldn't stop myself from smiling.

"What is it?" she tried to intimidate me in response. "I'm upset at you right now–what's so funny about that?"

“Well, I mean…” I pointed at the cat, at the Afflicting Cat. “You’re talking all wrong–Hanekawa.”

I pointed at Tsubasa Hanekawa.

“……”

“What’s the matter, model student? Where’d all the kitty sounds in your words go? That’s one of the Afflicting Cat’s character traits…right?!”

Then the cat–Hanekawa–

She was silent for a good while after I made my point–finally, with a resigned tone, said, “Oh. I get it,” exactly as before. “No, I guess it’d be ‘Nyow I get it’–but whatever. Wait. What? When did you figure it out?”

She seemed oddly cheerful and showed no signs of guilt or embarrassment.

Yes, it was the same Hanekawa as always.

Hanekawa–seemed like the usual Hanekawa.

There was–nothing unusual about her.

No.

Hanekawa–was never once not herself.

Never unlike herself.

Never dissimilar to herself.

Never.

There was a lot of her consciousness left inside of her? No.

There was no front or reverse side, no black or white.

Flip over the reverse side and you had the obverse side.

We were getting the dark side of Hanekawa, but we were getting all sides of her too.

Twist it, turn it however you want, she was still her.

Hanekawa–was Hanekawa.

No matter where, no matter when.

All of the mayhem, all of the misdeeds.

All of the mischief.

All of it–was something she'd done herself.

Just as in the story of the Afflicting Cat.

She'd never changed places with anything to begin with.

Now here was a case–just as there was never any cat possessing Hanekawa in the first place–

Behind every ghost–was a silver tongue.

"I kind of had an idea from the beginning. I'm your friend, you know. I'm not going to mistake you for someone else. So–how could I not know?" I said flatly, without emotion.

Nearly in a monotone.

This exchange was so ridiculous that I couldn't speak any other way.

What an utterly stupid dialogue.

"It doesn't matter if some aberration takes you over or if you win one over–you're still you, Hanekawa. Do you really think a simple change in personality is going to change who you are as a person? That's you. It's who you are. If a friend sends you a message asking for help, you're going to rush to their side, no matter what you're facing, no matter who you're facing–it's like an instinct for you, like a

cat playing with a ball of yarn. You have to rush over! That's who you are."

"…This. This is who I am, huh?"

Hanekawa looked down at her own body.

Her body, transformed into an aberration.

Her monstrous form.

"That's right," I said. "Because even though you're mad at me right now for lying, part of you is breathing a sigh of relief, isn't it? You're relieved–that I'm not dead, that no one's killed me. Aren't you glad that message was a lie?"

"……"

"You're just so kind, and you're just so strong. You're too kind, too strong. You're so overly kind that it drags the rest of your life down, and you're so overly strong that you'd sell your soul to an aberration. You're so right that it's oppressive. I understand why you'd want to deny that part of yourself–I don't understand, but I do. But listen, Hanekawa… Do listen, Hanekawa… Listen, Hanekawa, that's who you are!"

Shoulder it!

Hold onto it!

Don't let it go!

I take back what I said–goddammit.

There was no way I could maintain my monotone. I was nearly screeching, like I was in a heated argument with someone.

I couldn't keep my emotions out of my words.

I couldn't keep my passion out of my actions.

I couldn't keep myself–from confessing to Hanekawa how I really felt about her.

"You're going to live the rest of your life as the person you are! You're not gonna be able to change! You can't become someone else, and you can't become something else, either! That's the person you were born as, and it's the person you grew up to be, so why do you think there's something you can do about it? It's already done, it's over–sure, the past might be connected to the present, but it's still the past–it's simply your character background! Deny it all you want, but it's not going away! Instead of complaining, you should just stick with it! You can do it!"

"What are you talking about, Araragi?"

Hanekawa–took in my shrieking.

Then, as if confused.

As though perplexed.

She tilted her head and forced a smile.

An awkward smile.

A painful smile.

"Stop being unreasonable–I struggle too, you know," she told me. "Even I have things that I can and can't do. Even I'm human."

"You know you're not human," I interrupted her. "You entrusted your body to an aberration. Don't you dare call yourself a human right now."

"What an awful thing to say, Araragi," chided Hanekawa–the smile still on her face. "You know why I turned out this way. And you're still going to tell me I need to be doing everything I can? That's awful. You couldn't be any worse. Don't you feel any sympathy for me?"

“Hell no,” I gave Hanekawa the same answer I’d given Oshino. “You don’t have any idea who your real dad is, your birth mom committed suicide, you got sent from one family to another before ending up with two unrelated parents you couldn’t connect to, you were raised in a cold household, but even then you forced yourself to act like it was all normal, and you actually managed to pull it off–you managed to breeze through a life under martial law. Talk about unlucky! You have got some bad luck! I know I shouldn’t say this, but what an unfortunate life! But you know what–is that really so bad?!”

Isn’t it fine?! What’s so bad about that?! You’re being so serious–come on, cut it out!

“Okay? It’s okay! Don’t worry about it! Just chill out! You don’t have to feel like you’re suffering just because your life is unfortunate, you don’t have to sulk just because your life hasn’t been blessed! What’s wrong with staying positive in the face of adversity? You know what? What you’re going to do after this is go home looking like nothing ever happened! Live the same old life with your father and mother who are out of the hospital now! You’ll never be able to reconcile with either of them, I guarantee that! Even if you somehow beat the odds and become happy someday, it’s not going to matter, because no matter how happy you are, it’s never going to erase your crappy past! You can’t pretend it never happened, you’re going to be dragging it around with you! No matter what you do, no matter what happens, that misfortune is going to sit in your heart forever! You’ll remember it just when you think you forgot, you’ll dream about it for the rest of your life! *We* are going to be having nightmares for the rest of our lives! That’s how it’s going to be–and since there’s nothing you can do about it, don’t try to look away! Playing a prank on some random passerby, playing streaker in your underwear is just going to take a tiny bit of stress off your mind, in reality it’s not going to change a thing!”

"…It's not going to change a thing."

It's not going to change a thing.

It's not going to change out a thing.

It's not going to change into anything.

Put on a mask, take the cat out of the bag, turn into an aberration–it's not going to change, it's not going to change, it's not going to change.

You're still you.

"There's no way I'm ever going to sympathize with you," I repeated for good measure.

Like I was cornering her, steamrolling her with words.

I condemned Tsubasa Hanekawa.

"Weren't you going to rehabilitate me? So what're you doing becoming a delinquent?!"

Don't make a cat your reason.

Don't make an aberration your excuse.

Don't make a ghost your catalyst.

Don't use misfortune as your springboard to grow.

Because if you do–how is that any different from clawing at yourself in the end?

Aberrations–*don't really exist,* you know?

Now if anything's a lie.

That is it.

"But if you still want to relieve your stress, then I'll take it all on. I'd be happy to feel up your breasts whenever you want, and I'll look

at any part of your body you want me to while you're in your underwear. So–be satisfied with that."

I'll find as much time for you as you want.

We're friends, after all.

She listened to my proposal in silence–and then Hanekawa.

Tsubasa Hanekawa said, "You really are the worst, Araragi."

You're giving me a headache, she said.

"Araragi… You might become a star, but you could never become a hero."

"I can't become a star, either."

I shook my head.

"The only thing I can become is a vampire."

And–I'd even messed that one up.

"Oh. So you're not going to become–my hero. You're not going to. I've always wondered, Araragi. Do you actually hate me?"

"Yup," I nodded. "Actually, I hate you."

"Oh. Well, I actually hate you too."

And then.

"Just die," she muttered, taking her eyes off of me, with what seemed like contempt, in a vanishingly small voice.

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Mrow, Hanekawa said like a cat–and took to all fours once again.

All twenty of her transformed claws were digging into the concrete floor. She'd done something similar before in our classroom. Hold on, were a cat's claws retractable?

They say the skillful hawk hides its talons–but it looked like the same went for cats.

So the talons themselves–were the talent.

"Mya-ha! You're going to take on all of my stress nyow, Araragi? How wonderful," Hanekawa said, maintaining her posture, looking up from below. "So you don't mind if I mewder you?"

"Go ahead. It'd be a dream come true," I answered, spreading my arms. "I want to die at your hands."

"Oh."

Then you'd better die.

Just after I'd barely recognized the words–or maybe just before.

I found myself silently blown backwards.

To be more precise, I found the upper half of my body being blown backwards.

I wasn't sure what had happened.

Well, I was probably raked by her claws, or maybe pierced by her fangs, or she could have just slammed into me.

That's about all the variety in attacks a cat has–and none of them should have been able to separate the top half of a human body from the bottom half with a single strike.

But this was why aberrations were aberrations.

This regrettable blow, with its heart-stopping impact, chopped my torso in two at around my hips, causing my back to hit the wall behind me so fast I could have raced a bullet train.

Actually, you know what it was like?

It was like Usui when he got hit by the Gatotsu Zero Shiki, or maybe Frieza in his last moments as he fought against a Super Saiyan. That's what it felt like.

This was one hell of a Shampoo I was up against.

The bottom half of my body still somehow stood in place–as I trailed down the wall I'd been beaten onto and slid to the floor.

Ah.

My eyes were so low to the ground.

"Ow…"

And then.

After a slight delay–the pain kicked in.

I watched as my organs oozed and glistened out of the exposed section–and an almost comical amount of pain ran through not just the wound but my entire body.

"O-Ow–"

"OWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWW!!"

However–a scream that prevented me from expressing my pain echoed through the cramped classroom.

Like the cry of a cat in heat.

A howl–scratching everything else out.

"M…MYAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa.

As if the silence during that strike had all been a lie.

This scream that seemed like it could reach the center of town, this shriek that seemed like it could roll across the world, was, of course–needless to say, Hanekawa's.

No.

Maybe this alone–was the Afflicting Cat's.

The agonizing death of an aberration.

"A-Araragi! What! What did you do–to me?!" asked Hanekawa in between the screaming.

When I looked over, her posture was the same as mine as she crawled along the floor. Asking the question now, a little late in the day, seemed like an act of pure curiosity–but the answer was clear.

I used my index finger to point straight at it.

The bottom half of my body, still upright.

"…! Wha-"

Hanekawa was left speechless.

Of course she was at a loss for words–sticking out of that half of my body, *almost as if the only thing left there was my spine,* was a single katana.

Well, I guess it would be more accurate in this case to say that the blade had stitched the lower half of my body to the floor.

A katana.

Its identity goes without saying–the enchanted blade Kokorowatari.

The Aberration Slayer.

“Th-That blade–before I got here, you–”

“That’s right. *I swallowed it before you got here*–like some old-timey magician.”

Just as the girl vampire had done.

No, strictly speaking, she and I had done different things–while the girl vampire used her vampiric power to generate matter and her own body was the sheath, I’d plunged the sword into my mouth and passed it through my stomach as if I were tracing my spinal cord, right through my left foot and into the floor, simply turning the blade into a shaft for my body.

You could say I’d skewered myself.

It would be an impossible feat for anyone without a vampire’s immortality–and even then, it was an endless cycle of death and regeneration, slain by the Aberration Slayer only to be restored, a living hell.

That’s why I’d stood for half an hour waiting for Hanekawa instead of sitting. A shaft had been placed in me along my spine, as my body’s axis, and so I couldn’t sit–and of course, it was in order to *hide* the Aberration Slayer that I’d done something so deathly painful that it felt like a long-awaited relief when the top half of my body had been divided from the bottom.

To hide it in my body.

So that Hanekawa would attack unwarily, unguardedly.

If you want an analogy, it was like filling a sandbag with shards of glass–that was what Hanekawa had attacked, which is why she was helpless.

The plan would have been meaningless if she’d gone for my arm again–and provoking her hadn’t been easy.

It hadn't been easy for me to say all those heartless, obscene things, like that I'd touch her breasts or look at her in her underwear.

"Ugh, agh, uuuuuuurgh! B-But! But–but Araragi, this pain–"

"Right. *It doesn't hurt, does it? Not for you,*" I said. "That sword buried in me is known as the Aberration Slayer–I borrowed it from the vampire. It's an enchanted blade that can only cut aberrations. It's not you it cut–just the Afflicting Cat buried in you."

She was on the floor and holding the back of her right hand–which suggested to me that it was a kitty punch with her right arm that had blown away half my body.

But there wasn't a single scratch on her hand.

Of course there wasn't.

It couldn't wound humans–the Aberration Slayer only sliced aberrations.

The Aberration Slayer only slew aberrations.

This was a lot more than the special trait of the Afflicting Cat that Oshino had so much trouble against–its energy drain, which could even turn a scratch into a fatal wound.

Not debilitation.

Not incapacitation.

It didn't produce those kinds of half-hearted results.

There was no salvation faced with it.

A single scratch from it could kill an aberration–that was the enchanted blade Kokorowatari.

"Th-That's–"

I'd given my explanation.

And Hanekawa looked utterly astonished.

“That’s ridiculous. How could a sword like that exist?”

“Yeah. You didn’t know about it, did you?”

I never told you about it.

Even I had only heard about the Aberration Slayer straight from the vampire’s mouth. It wasn’t like she’d been passing any legend down to me–it was just a confidence.

Spring break.

On the roof of this abandoned building–when I was with the girl vampire in her perfect form.

I heard a story from her while we spent time together.

That conversation with Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade was one of the few memories from my hellish experience that I treasured.

That’s why no one knew about the Aberration Slayer’s properties.

Not even you, Hanekawa.

’Cause I didn’t tell you, either.

“Even Oshino didn’t know she had this crazy sword until a moment ago, and he’s an expert. It’s quite literally–beyond our ken as humans.”

“E-Even Mister Oshino? He didn’t know about it?” groaned Hanekawa.

As she sat there, unable to hide her bewilderment, I continued.

Proudly.

“I’m sure you’d never have fallen for it if you’d known about the existence of this killer item–just about anyone could come up with

hiding a sword in your body as a trap, and just about anyone might try it. It's a superficial idea, not something you could call a strategy."

And yet, Hanekawa fell for it.

How unexpectedly easy, how unsophisticated.

She fell for it like a lemming off a cliff.

Because she didn't know about it.

Because–she didn't know.

"Even so, it involved some wishful thinking–there was the chance that you knew about the sword's existence even without me telling you. I'm relieved, Hanekawa–so even you don't know everything."

"……nkk."

"Even you. Don't know everything," I said, gasping for air. "So stop acting like you know everything or like you've figured everything out–like, 'just die'? 'I oughta just die'? Come on, what do you think you're saying?! Look, there's still a lot out there you don't know, even you! Come on! I don't know everything, I just know what I know–say it! Say it like you always do!"

Korff.

A pool of blood had gotten mixed up in my last few words.

It was all-you-can-bleed day for my torso and my mouth, like I'd gone from being a sanguinarian to a hemophile.

No, this was no time to be making lame jokes.

It was clear that I was going to die.

I was just going to die a wretched death here.

Even though a single scratch from the enchanted blade was enough to make the Afflicting Cat disappear, my plan also meant I'd be hit with an attack powerful enough to pierce my torso (though I

never imagined it would separate the top half of my body from the bottom half). And just like with my left arm, any attack from the Afflicting Cat came with an energy drain, meaning that my vampiric healing ability wouldn't be effective. In fact, it didn't look like anything was going to regenerate from my torso down–there was just an endless spillage of blood and guts.

Maybe if I was able to force the lower half of my body, still pierced by the enchanted blade, back onto myself, but that was not an option in this situation.

And anyway, the Aberration Slayer had dealt some amount of damage to my body both while I swallowed it and when my torso was blown away, and to be honest, that amount was quite large. Even so, that portion seemed to be regenerating already thanks to vampiric immortality, which said that death would not leave it dead, that killing would not leave it killed–but whatever the case.

I was going to die.

I was going to die by Hanekawa's hands.

I was going to die for Hanekawa.

God–could I be any more blessed?

"……"

Yes, I knew.

I knew that my actions were those of a complete buffoon's–that much was clear.

It was pointless.

This–this was frighteningly meaningless.

Yes, using the Aberration Slayer would let me exorcise the Afflicting Cat–but that was all.

The tale would come to an end, but the problem wouldn't be solved.

It wasn't like Hanekawa would be able to overcome her stress–it wouldn't do anything about her family issues.

It would erase the being known as the Afflicting Cat, and that was all.

In other words, we would just be going back to before Golden Week.

There was no real difference between what I was doing and the cat's attempt to get rid of her stress by attacking five hundred people–no, actually, that plan might have had a better chance of saving her.

If this solution sufficed–then would Oshino really have lost a hundred times? He'd have settled it during the first encounter. Talk about a compromise–that must have been the second warning or whatever it was Oshino tried to tell me earlier as my best friend.

I was trying to place all the blame on an aberration and completely reset the situation.

It was like I'd messed up in the process of beating a game and was moving to hit the power button to reload from an earlier save.

If this were *Animal Crossing,* Mr. Resetti would be yelling at me.

It was cowardly, and it was temporary.

Truly only palliative.

But that was fine.

It's not like I'm trying to save you or anything, Hanekawa.

All that stuff about wanting to keep you from killing people or killing your parents is an afterthought now.

I don’t care if it’s meaningless, I don’t care if it’s pointless–I want to die for you.

That’s all.

Well, yeah. It’s…you know.

Ah… No, well, I guess I’ve said everything I wanted to say.

Yeah.

Like I just told you.

You can do it.

You can do it.

There’s a lot to do, and you’re not going to want to do a lot of it, and there’s going to be so much more of it, but–you can do it.

You can do it. You can become happy.

I’m going to die here–but I’m me, an aberration, a monster, a vampire, so it doesn’t have to count as killing a person. Just forget about it.

You’re going to be alone now–but do a good job of it.

“Mrr…YEOWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWW!”

Just as I went to close my eyes with an air of nihilistic pretention, self-absorbed and self-satisfied–something happened that startled me.

Hanekawa’s form changed even further.

To look even more feline–as white fur covered her arms and legs.

Her fangs and claws shot out and began to protrude.

You could barely call what I was looking at a cat. It looked like a white tiger.

“MYAAA

Why hurt Hanekawa? Don't tell me you forgot? *Why you possessed Hanekawa–why she won you over?*

Or is a cat's memory just not good enough?

I know it's not some kind of feline fickleness.

And I know it's not because it's *like you* or *not like you* to do.

You've been pouncing at every opportunity to help her–you've been lending her all of your paws because when she saw you lying there dead on the street, *she didn't sympathize with you one bit.*

She followed her rules. She hewed to her ethical notions.

There was no emotion there whatsoever.

That's what you said, and you were exactly right–but it's more than that.

It was the same with me–I'd been attacked by a vampire and turned into something inhuman, but Hanekawa didn't have a shred of sympathy for me.

Not sympathizing, not commiserating.

She took absolutely no pity on me–*didn't look down on me.*

She saw me as an equal.

Isn't that right, Afflicting Cat?

Whether dead on the street or attacked by a vampire–

"There's nothing *sorry* about us, is there?!"

I understand.

You weren't being fickle.

You weren't just repaying her.

You fell in love with Hanekawa for the same reason, didn't you–so.

So quit attacking her like that.

Stop it.

Won't you stop?

Please, stop.

Hear–my plea.

You're going to make it so that I didn't die for Hanekawa's sake at all–

"Are ye a dunce, servant? Is it not obvious that cutting the power so recklessly will damage thy contraption?"

And then.

I suddenly heard–a voice in my head.

Thanks to the intense pain.

As I arrived on the brink of death–I heard a hallucinated voice.

Not Mr. Resetti's.

I heard *her voice*–reprimanding me.

"……ngh?!"

Really, now.

It seemed like a little much, even by hallucinatory standards–it had happened so suddenly by the time I realized what was happening that not only did I not know when she'd shown up, I still wasn't sure if she was really there, her presence so unclear that you could call her the definition of an aberration, this girl who appeared out of nowhere as she stepped over my head–of course she wasn't going to talk.

Like an act of divine intervention–or rather.

Hers was a *demonic* intervention.

Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade–the husk thereof, a young girl with golden hair and eyes.

There was no way she was going to talk.

“Such was Musashi Miyamoto’s calibre as a swordsman that they say he once wielded an oar in place of a blade–but I see the complete opposite applies to thee. What reckless use of my famed sword, my pride. Some live carving ye’ve prepared of this aberration. I nearly feel like laughing.”

Just as I was thinking about what a glib and garrulous hallucination this was, I heard a *krak* as she plucked off her own right arm with the greatest of ease. Like it belonged to a model kit.

Of course, her arms are not pieces from a model kit or anything of the sort–and lively, red blood began to gush out of the cross-section.

As my eyes sat transfixed on this spectacle that reminded me of myself just eight days earlier, the girl vampire dangled her left arm from her right and showered my torso with the fresh blood it spilled.

“……nkk!”

As I’ve already discussed, a vampire’s blood possesses healing effects–and what’s more, this was the blood of a girl vampire who was once a pure-blooded, pure-bred vampire.

Those effects were dramatic–I watched as the lower half of my body grew from the open end of my torso like it was a lizard’s tail. Simultaneously, the half of my body skewered by the enchanted blade in the center of the room seemed to evaporate and disappear–leaving only my clothes, my shoes, and Kokorowatari’s overlong span.

But even then.

How could her blood have such incredible healing properties when she was nothing more than the dregs of–oh, right.

I quickly resolved my own doubts.

In short, after all was said and done, I'd *given too much blood* to the girl vampire over Golden Week–I'd been coming up with excuses for her to drink my blood, and I'd gone overboard.

Even when I received the blade from her earlier, I'd let her drink her fill of my blood, not as any kind of thanks, but really as a kind of farewell gift–and so.

And so now.

And so at this exact moment.

Her *vampirism* had returned, rather too fully.

While I wouldn't say she was on the level she was at during spring break–you could at least draw a comparison.

Enough so that it surpassed the effects of the Afflicting Cat's energy drain.

I'd misread the situation.

The amount of blood I'd given her was a total amateur's eyeball measurement–I was too haphazard, I'd overshot it.

"As ever and always, I see that ye focus only on what stands before thee, my sad little servant. Best not think thou can keep me alive at thy pleasure–and then die at thy pleasure."

Fool, she said.

She made no attempt to hide her displeasure as she said it.

That gruesome smile–showed no sign of appearing as she said it.

"I shall give thee a flawless example, so watch, watch in fascination. Ready? *This is how the Aberration Slayer is used.*"

And that was the last hallucination.

I hadn't heard anything in the first place.

I had only imagined that she said any of it.

I was self-absorbed, excessively positive, and prone to wishful thinking.

But–I was fine with the words being a hallucination.

I couldn't be any happier.

Just as long as she–wasn't a hallucination.

So long as she was here.

If she'd come here.

It was so much more than enough–that I began to cry.

"Mrr–row?!"

Wordlessly–as wordless as she'd been the entire time, the girl vampire, her presence royal despite her child's body, approached the Afflicting Cat; picking up the enchanted blade sticking out of the floor on the way like an afterthought, and storing it back inside her body with a quick gulp as if to say there was no need for such an ostentatious tool, she approached the Afflicting Cat.

And without saying a word of grace.

She bit into its neck in a show of bad manners.

She was dining.

Doing everything it could to withstand the pain from the blade, the Afflicting Cat couldn't begin to shake off the vampire. The girl's energy was being drained from the moment they touched–but even that had no effect.

As if energy drains worked on a vampire.

No matter how much vitality was sucked away, the vampire could suck it right back.

It was as if each was gnawing at the other, but the skill difference was just too great.

The beautiful white fur that now covered Hanekawa's entire body gradually began to recede–the aberration that was the Afflicting Cat, and the aberration alone, was being sucked away.

It was being absorbed into the girl vampire.

Hanekawa's stress–was being absorbed.

"It's fine," I mumbled.

My body had made a complete recovery, but I still didn't feel like getting off the floor, and I mumbled like I was talking to myself.

But I wasn't talking to myself.

My words were meant for Hanekawa.

"It's fine, Hanekawa. I know we're all screw-ups… I know it's miserable for you, how you deserve better, how you'll never be able to come back from it all… I know it's going to be like this for the rest of your life, but it's fine!"

The girl vampire had already disappeared somewhere without a trace as if the scene was none of her concern, leaving me and Hanekawa alone in the classroom.

Her cat ears were gone and her hair was black again.

Hanekawa was now fully back to normal, stretched out in her underwear like she was sleeping, having been freed from the girl vampire–

“No way it’s fine.”

She spoke as if she were moaning the words in her sleep.

Ha!

Right, of course.

You’re always right.

But whatever the case, as happily as in a reverie, as bloodily as in a nightmare, as crazedly as in a dream come true–

We were punting the problem.

013

The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

At long last we can end, wrap up, drop off–call it the flat line of this story.

The next day, I was roused from bed as usual by my little sisters Karen and Tsukihi–no, my condition was closer to being dead than asleep, so maybe it would be more accurate to say I was revived, not roused, by them.

By the way, my prediction was right. Karen and Tsukihi, the Fire Sisters, seemed to have gone all across town from May third to the seventh to tackle the Changing Cat scare–but it seems they never managed to get a hold of its tail over Golden Week.

But you can say it was only natural since the cat had no tail.

I wanted to lecture them about not wasting time while their own brother was busy on his hands and knees, but it seemed like they were going to continue their search, yet to be discouraged. If that's what they wanted to do, then fine. I decided I wouldn't stop them, not this time. It is the way of the world for a tale that's seen its end to be recited and passed down.

I rushed through another breakfast before getting on my bike and leaving–I was heading to school, which meant my ride was my granny bike, not my mountain bike.

But first, there were a number of places I needed to go.

It's why I left early.

The first spot I needed to visit was where Hanekawa and I buried the white cat. I guess you can call it a grave–the grave Oshino said was now empty.

I was unfamiliar with the neighborhood, and it ended up taking a little while to get there, but it wasn't too hard to find–however.

I don't know how to say this, but when I dug up the spot with the gardening shovel I'd brought–when I decided to desecrate its grave, it was right there.

The cat's buried corpse.

The remains of the dull-silver cat–were buried in the earth.

It was empty–no longer.

It was a real corpse, one that smelled of decay.

"Hmm."

Though I said "however," I knew this would be the case–it was another obvious fact.

Exactly as I'd predicted.

Now the real question is whether Oshino knew–no.

It was probably my description.

He must have mistakenly dug up the wrong spot, tricking him into thinking the carcass had disappeared–even he wasn't omnipotent, even he could get mixed up.

I satisfied myself with that answer and covered the cat's remains with dirt, burying it once more.

I put my hands together.

And prayed for its happiness in the afterlife.

"All right."

Obviously enough, my next stop was the abandoned cram school–I needed to hurry since I'd spent some time finding the grave.

Not that it was an emergency–but with my body so direly wounded last night, I'd been in no place to give my thanks to the girl vampire, and I didn't want too much time to pass before I did.

I was thinking I'd even pat her head.

A sign of submission it wouldn't be.

But it did seem like she might let me–she might allow me to thank her, at least.

"……"

But my expectations were far off the mark.

The knowing superiority accorded to me in an epilogue was powerless.

I arrived and went up to a fourth-floor classroom to face the girl vampire only to find her wearing, of all things, a weird helmet with goggles that you might while riding on a scooter.

I couldn't pat her head like that.

"Ah, that thing? Yes, our li'l vampire begged me for it. She did solve the whole issue with the cat, so I gifted it to her as her reward," Oshino explained.

What had he done? "I wasn't off the mark so much as… Well, what a fleeting hope it was."

Could I not even thank her?

Our relationship hadn't improved one iota. If anything, a gulf had opened up between us.

Oh, well.

I now felt certain that the voice I thought I heard was a hallucination–and that she really wasn't hiding her embarrassment or being a tsundere or anything and hadn't saved me.

She must have held a profound grudge against Hanekawa thanks to spring break, and there was the excuse of protecting me, her source of nutrition, and just maybe, she was repaying me for letting her eat ten donuts from Mister Donut–but that just proved my point.

She was more fickle than a cat. It had been no more than a whim.

Fine.

Whims were part of talent.

Someday I'll hear that hallucination in reality, and I'll pat your head, and I'll muss up your beautiful, golden hair–that can be my goal.

Someday we'll understand each other.

Without building any fences between us like "human" and "aberration."

"I was surprised enough that our li'l vampire let you borrow her enchanted blade, but she even got up and went to save you? People are just supposed to go and get saved on their own, you know. Ha haa, and I'd already given up on you and missy class president."

"……"

He really knew how to toss out a cold remark, didn't he?

I wasn't sure how serious he was being–but then he was always serious when it came to these matters.

Well.

That coldness was part of his flavor.

"It's a miracle that your plan even worked–I held my tongue because I didn't want to be a wet blanket, but missy class prez herself had turned into an aberration, so there was a real chance the enchanted blade would've cut through her too."

“What?! You’re telling me this now?!”

I’d gone ahead with the plan thinking I had an expert’s seal of approval!

I knew he was cold, but that crossed a line!

“If she was *really* in a trance–it would’ve been bad,” he said.

“……”

Right–of course Oshino had known.

No wonder he’d had a difficult time against her.

“By the way, Oshino. I don’t mean to complain or anything when I’ve asked you to handle the aftermath, but…about Hanekawa. Is she okay?”

“Hm?”

Oshino tilted his head like he was playing dumb.

This was the last thing I needed to do before going to school–something I had to make sure of.

“Oh, she’s fine. You have my guarantee on that–missy class prez isn’t going to remember a thing about this Golden Week. All of that stuff–her memories as Black Hanekawa–it’s completely gone,” Oshino assured, putting an unlit cigarette in his mouth in the most affected manner.

“Black Hanekawa? Huh?”

“I’m talking about her in *that state.* It’s not quite right to call that an Afflicting Cat–a new breed requires a new name. Black Hanekawa, a new yokai for the contemporary age.”

“You’re horrible at naming things,” I badmouthed him while thinking that it was pretty spot-on.

It neither overreached nor fell short.

It was just right–name expressing form.

Dark black.

Not because of the color of her underwear–well, yes, that was of course part of it, but more essentially.

That dark, dark, dark, blacked-out being, too–was unmistakably Tsubasa Hanekawa.

“A new breed, huh? Well…I guess *she herself* said the same thing, but–couldn’t you call it an honest-to-goodness case of a split personality instead of an aberration or anything?”

“Mm. Nope, that’s not it. It really is an aberration. That’s how we ought to explain it,” Oshino went and declared. “I took missy class prez back to her home after it all, while she was only half-conscious–and she said a lot to me on the way.”

“Half-conscious? Wasn’t she unconscious?”

“Well, yes. I wouldn’t have been able to get those answers from her otherwise–it was a little like hypnosis.”

In other words.

Oshino’s field of expertise.

“Collecting stories of aberrations, huh?”

“Yep. It’s rare to see a new breed these days, in the height of the mechanical age–which is why I wanted to get the story straight from the source. Well, and I did also bill her for the work. Around a hundred thousand yen.”

A hundred thousand? That was way too cheap compared to my bill… No, but as Oshino admitted, the girl vampire had played a large part in solving the case. Maybe it was an appropriate amount given his share of the work.

He was probably charging her for expenses and nothing else.

“So,” I asked him, “what did you get out of her through your hypnosis or whatever?”

“Nothing that I hadn’t guessed for myself, really–the cat seemed to have been a plain and proper Afflicting Cat at first. But that phenomenon was done and over with in no time at all.”

“Done and over with?”

“The moment she drained her parents’ energy–*the moment she took out the closest people who happened to be around*–missy class president regained her consciousness for a time. I guess that means–her wish was granted at that point.”

“Her wish…”

Her desire.

For her–for Tsubasa Hanekawa–to face her parents in violent revolt, that was her–

“*But then it came right back.* No–I ought to say missy class prez craved its return, so she brought back the cat that had left her and won it over to her side. She won over something that had taken over her. An aberration she should have been able to let go of and reject. She let it continue. I’m the one who said the Afflicting Cat and missy class prez were made for each other, but I’d add, almost too well for each other–they matched too perfectly, so she couldn’t let go. In other words, she was ensorcelled by the cat’s mysterious charm–*she grew attached to it,* and at that moment a new breed of aberration, Black Hanekawa, was born.”

“And I guess–that’s when her crime spree began.”

Draining energy as a way to relieve her stress.

Night after night, like a crazed slasher–

Like a deviant, she attacked people.

You could absolutely justify draining her parents' energy. Who couldn't see the extenuating circumstances in her motive? But there was none to be found in what followed.

Nothing even resembling any.

If you asked her for a reason.

Hanekawa probably would have replied thus:

I did it because I felt annoyed. For no reason–

–I just felt pissed off.

How laughable.

Justified while the aberration still possessed her, only becoming wicked after winning it over–but that's what made her human.

Tsubasa Hanekawa, human being.

"I don't know," I said, "it's like the cat was left holding the bag it was let out of. Hanekawa is to blame for a lot of this, but Oshino? If that thing, the Afflicting Cat–no, Hanekawa–or Black Hanekawa–kept on attacking people, would it have eventually gotten rid of all her stress and disappeared?"

My doubts were directed just as much at my own actions.

How do I put it–the thought that I got involved when I didn't need to, that I'd been a busybody, wouldn't go away.

That I'd been self-absorbed, that I should have left it alone, that she never requested anything of me.

That she never relied on me–and that I still forced my way in.

I couldn't help feeling regretful over getting in Hanekawa's way.

"It's not the case–remember what I told you, Araragi? If we didn't do anything, she'd be won over by the cat and disappear. Our

only option at that point would have been to kill her. If simply going wild could get rid of your stress, it wouldn't be such a problem. That only causes more stress, if you ask an easygoing guy like me–you do want to retain an easygoing amount of stress. You could say that if anything caused missy class prez's transformation into Black Hanekawa, her rampage, it was that her stress over her parents *vanished.*"

"What? But–"

"Maybe it's like tensile stress? Or like a strut that would fall over without any pressure on it–being freer than anyone only means being less free than anyone–but even if you discount all that, relying on an aberration to relieve your stress is asking too much. You were right to do what you did."

"I was right…"

I was right? When there was no right or wrong?

What was right, and who was right–could be so arbitrary.

Yes, I may have been right.

But it's not like Hanekawa was necessarily wrong.

She'd merely been dark, and bad.

Black–didn't mean unserious.

It didn't mean impure.

I said, "So this Black Hanekawa thing took whatever memories that would be inconvenient for Hanekawa along with it–that's a pretty convenient aberration, if you ask me."

"It'd be closer to say it's shouldering those memories for her, like a cosignatory. It's an aberration missy class president created–so of course it's going to be convenient for her. As her work, it's going to be conveniently ideal. Not that forgetting is necessarily a good

thing," Oshino noted. "As for her parents, it seems like the powerful energy drain caused their memories of being attacked by their daughter to vanish–and that's just putting a lid on something rotten. The source of the smell–is still right there."

"Still right there, huh."

The strain, the discord.

The domestic violence, the child abandonment.

All of it.

It was still there–still existing, not ending.

Even so, I thought that would be okay for now–it was better for her to forget.

Losing what was in your heart beat losing your very self.

Pretending this Golden Week was nothing more than a dog bite, nothing more than a cat scratch, a bad dream–

Pretending that we didn't see anything.

We should forget it.

Because whether or not we remembered.

What happened did happen–and nothing was going to change, anyway.

"Conveniently ideal, huh? Like an original aberration character?" I asked.

"Right, exactly. I bet you came up with original superhero wrestlers when you were in grade school."

Wrong generation.

But to be fair, I did come up with my own original Stand.

“A convenient hero who saves you–and because missy class prez couldn’t search for one outside of herself, she nurtured one inside herself.”

“When you put it that way, it really does sound like she has a split personality.”

“That’s not what it is, but yes, I’m wording it in a way that makes it sound that way. Because it’s best for us to agree that’s what it was–that’s how aberrations are to begin with.”

“To begin with?”

“We agree to blame something on a yokai because while it may not be the fact of the matter, it would feel so hopeless to come out and speak the blunt truth–it’s a way to shift responsibility. Missy class prez was so crushed by her domestic stress that it made her act in eccentric ways–instead of that conclusion, isn’t there a saving grace in *just saying* that it was all an aberration, or an Afflicting Cat, or Black Hanekawa, or a case of split personalities?”

“In just saying.”

It wasn’t like Oshino, the balancer–in fact, it seemed like he risked refuting his own theories, but maybe it was his way of compromising here. Because he believed that he had utterly failed to do his job as a professional.

In other words, it wasn’t a compromise–so much as it was him redrawing the lines.

The punch line of this story.

It was irrational, it was surprising–

“Neither black nor white. Leaving it at gray…”

What a punch line–relying on wordplay.

“It can’t be helped. It’s the conclusion that missy class prez chose for herself. I can’t butt in and run my mouth, and neither can you. The most you can do is to keep on treating her the way you’ve always treated her.”

“…Yeah.”

Just saying so, huh?

For the sake of a friend who’d searched for a hero inside herself, unable to look for one outside. As someone who failed to become her hero, it was all I could do.

Yeah.

I couldn’t even die for Hanekawa.

“Oshino. If you’re going to call that a new breed of yokai–couldn’t you say that Hanekawa’s also been possessed all this time by a yokai called family?” A vague thought had popped into my head–and so I asked him. I tried asking him. “Not a cat, not a demon, but–”

“Family. But missy class president didn’t think of her parents as family, did she?”

“Exactly–that’s exactly what I mean.”

Family is something that’s supposed to be a natural part of life for just about anyone, the way Karen and Tsukihi are like a given part of mine. Yet, for Hanekawa, it transformed into something supernatural–which would mean that it wasn’t just these nine days of Golden Week, or even fifteen years. From the day she was born–she was bewitched by family.

“Couldn’t you say that the idea of a family had always been an aberration to Hanekawa?” I submitted.

“I wonder about that.” Oshino had his head tilted, like he didn’t agree. “I mean, real, actual families can be pretty annoying,

depressing things, no? Kids have their rebellious phases, and even some birth parents can be pretty worthless–tell me, Araragi. Can you draw a map of Japan?"

"Huh?"

I was dumbstruck.

What was this grown man saying to me all of a sudden?

Had he not been listening to me?

"Sure, of course I can. What's your point?"

"Well, I suppose most Japanese people are able to draw a map of Japan–but I think that's thanks to weather reports. We learn the shape of our country by watching weather forecasts."

I sighed.

Hmph.

Well, now that he mentioned it.

If you asked me to draw a map of Japan, I'd be picturing the kind of weather map they showed on TV.

"Okay, that might be true," I conceded. "We spend a lot more time looking at weather reports than at atlases. But so what?"

"It's a grave mistake to think you know Japan because you've watched some weather forecasts–that's what I'm trying to say."

Don't act like you know what you're talking about when all you have is a half-baked understanding–that's what he seemed to be telling me.

Now it made sense.

“By the way, Araragi, aberrations that embody the concept of family already exist–the kinds of things you think up have already been conceived of in the past.”

“I imagine. Well, sorry for trying to play expert,” I shrugged. “But Hanekawa still being herself the whole time she was a cat–just gets me thinking.”

“Why don’t you marry her?”

Casually.

He went and said that.

Dared to.

“What?”

“No, really, why don’t you get married to missy class prez? Doing that would give her the family she never had.”

“Um…”

Just listen to how frivolous he was being with that word.

Marriage?

“That’s not funny, Oshino.”

“Oh yeah? I think it’s a good idea. It seems like a fair deal if you want to repay her for offering a helping hand over spring break.”

“You know we need to consider Hanekawa’s feelings too, right?”

“I’m sure she has them,” Oshino replied–blithely, his attitude as goading as ever. “She has feelings. That’s why she was bewitched.”

“……”

“And she can become a victim or a perp. Even an aberration,” he reminded. “But what about you, Araragi? Shouldn’t we consider your feelings too?”

“My–feelings?”

“I was convinced that you’re in love with missy class prez.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

I smiled.

I grinned.

Yes–this was my moment to grin and act cool.

“I’m not in love with Hanekawa.”

“Oh, really?”

“Really.”

We’ll just say so.

The happiest choice.

Ha haa, Oshino laughed as well. A small laugh.

“Yeah, if you’re okay with that, Araragi, then I am too. And despite my question, it’s missy class prez’s feelings that are the most important here, not yours–because no matter what you or any Afflicting Cat does, people just go and get saved on their own.”

“And Hanekawa isn’t asking to be saved, either.”

She was unable to ask for outside help.

She was unable to ask for anything.

“If only she’d asked me,” I let out, sounding like a poor loser. It was something I had to say. “I’d have done anything for Hanekawa if only she’d leaned on me.”

“She must have thought you wouldn’t be of any use,” Oshino responded in the sharpest, most direct way possible. “She thought her own fantasies would be far more helpful, that’s all. Or maybe she actually did seek your aid.”

“Hunh?”

“It’s not like saying ‘Help’ is the only way to seek help. Just as you don’t have to say ‘I love you’ to love someone,” commented Mèmè Oshino–in his trademark tone, like he saw through everything. “We all have words that aren’t easy for us to mouth, Araragi.”

“……”

“Ha haa! But whether or not they ask to be saved, people just go and get saved on their own. You know what’s sad? That poor new breed of aberration that got sucked up by our li’l vampire and disappeared. In the end, it was a new breed with a brief history, a spontaneous mutation. No match for the old king. It’s not like people are going to be interested in an original aberration character until it takes root. The newer the better for machines and tatami mats, but when it comes to aberrations, it’s the other way around.”

“The king of aberrations–the vampire.”

I glanced in its direction.

But she wasn’t looking at me, only squatting in silence.

Oshino spoke again. “Hmm, you know, it doesn’t feel right to always be calling her ‘our li’l vampire’ or ‘the girl vampire.’ And fortunately, it looks like we’ll be able to communicate with her via the means we call feeding her Mister Donut, so why don’t I give the kid some kind of name–”

I hadn’t noticed the time pass, but we’d been talking for a while. The day’s classes were about to begin, so without giving much thought to his words, I left the abandoned building and headed to Naoetsu High.

I would be late at this rate.

When I’m late, Hanekawa gets mad at me.

So I pedal as hard as I can–and whether or not I can face her at school and carry on a normal conversation when she's forgotten everything doesn't even enter my focused mind.

I arrive at school just in time, park my bike in the parking lot, and start dashing up the stairs–but I'm not worried about anything.

I'm not anxious.

Hanekawa will smile at me like always.

And I'll return her smile like always. I'm certain of it.

I love you–isn't something I'm ever going to say to her.

"Hanekawa."

I whisper–so that no one can hear.

Hanekawa.

Miss Hanekawa.

I know that someday, I'll love someone who isn't you.

I'll love someone who isn't you, for the first time in my life.

I learned what it means to care for others from you, and I'm sure the day will come when I fall in love with someone other than you.

But these nine gold-gleaming days that you've forgotten–I bet I'll remember them forever and never forget them.

No matter what the future has in store for me, no matter what's to come, these feelings I have for you will never change, will never not have happened.

And so.

That is how, during the Golden Week of his third year in high school, his May as an eighteen-year-old, something that wasn't quite Koyomi Araragi's first love came to an end.

I climb the stairs.

Afterword

Because human beings are, all in all, creatures with terribly narrow outlooks, we can't help but want to solve any problem that might occur in our lives, but when you sit up and think about whether every problem that comes up over the course of a lifetime has to be solved, you may be surprised to find that not to be the case at all. Well no, of course it's better to solve a problem than to leave it unsolved, but when you take a broad look across the world, you unexpectedly find many problems that have been left sitting there, and while they do spew forth so many problems that it's a problem, people around them may have actually accepted them along with the harm that comes from them. In fact, having solved a problem sometimes results in greater chaos and confusion, though not always. There's the fact that people dislike change even if it's evolution and prefer stability no matter how unstable it is, but prior to any of that, an "environment" is what already accepted the problems as problems, or so I think. I mean, honestly, it's as though people feel most "alive" when they're confronting a problem and agonizing, suffering, and accumulating stress over it. Rather than the consummation of a longstanding wish or love bearing fruit, maybe life is about "problems"? In that case, you might say people don't strive to make their dreams come true; they dream just so they can strive. Geez, what sort of nightmare drama is that?

This volume, *NEKOMONOGATARI (BLACK),* is the seventh installment in the *MONOGATARI* series. It tells the story of Tsubasa Hanekawa's Golden Week, which we've been getting modest, casual, yet unsubtle whiffs of since "Hitagi Crab," the first story, was published in *Mephisto.* Actually, this was rather the type of secret tale that gets sealed away forever, but various conditions were met through no doing of my own and it is now seeing the light of day.

Thank you so much. Once a series has this many volumes out, though, its plot is wont to be full of fatal contradictions; if you do find any issues, I'd appreciate it if you could just smooth over and overcome them with your passion for reading. For that is how aberrations transform as they are passed down (I say, trying to sound cool). Anyway, this has been *NEKOMONOGATARI (BLACK),* a novel I wrote cat-percent to entertain myself. *NEKOMONOGATARI (WHITE)* will be out soon enough, and I hope you pick that one up too. I'm doing everything I can to make it cat-percent free of contradictions, meowkay?

The illustrator VOFAN worked on the front cover and insert images for publication. The anime version of *BAKEMONOGATARI* that was broadcast as I was putting together and writing this book had an incredible, motivating impact on me. I could not be any more grateful. It makes me want to keep writing an original worthy of such visual work.

See you again soon.

NISIOISIN

NEKOMONOGATARI (BLACK)

KODANSHA COMICS Digital Edition

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